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The Creative Writing Class of 2008
would like to dedicate LITMUS to our teachers:

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Contents

Kelsey Allagood

What I Can't Say

While my father was away, an old dog came back and my mother started taking tango lessons. Apparently my old dance teacher had this friend she knew from Manhattan who was some nationally-known tango/salsa teacher, and his name wasn't Pedro or Pablo but Don Schwartz. Miss Bonnie said she convinced Don to come to Alderville, of all places, to conduct a four-week Latin-dancing seminar at the studio downtown. I told Mom about this tango/salsa guy and she seemed mildly intrigued, but then an ad for lessons came out in the paper and the next thing I know my mother, who I didn't think had ever worn a neckline below her collarbone, has called Miss Bonnie and signed herself up for some tango dancing lessons with Don Schwartz. Beginners' lessons were every Friday night from seven until nine-thirty for three weeks, and she explicitly asked me not to tell my father, who at the time was in Virginia with his brother, testing his luck at finding a job up there.

"You know he'd probably feel left out if I did something like this," she told me. "This is just for me. I don't plan on ever using it. I don't keep things from you, Judy. Sometimes I wonder if I should."

I think I would have said more at the time, except then there was a sort of scratching at the kitchen door. While my father was in Virginia trying to find a job with his brother, who "co-owned" a charter fishing business in one of the lakes up there, Mom and I ate dinner at the kitchen table among the unpaid bills, rather than in the dining room. Mom was sitting sideways in her chair, as if she expected to stand at any moment, but neither of us got up, as if we weren't sure if the sound had actually happened. Finally I stood and looked out the window above the sink.

"Buster's here," I said. I opened the screen door and poked my head through. The air from the yard smelled of wet leaves and smoke, probably from someone burning refuse on the other side of the trees behind our house. The black lab was lying in the grass under the maple tree that was just about dead then. Buster was Abby Lundy's old dog, and Abby Lundy was the previous owner of the house on Redwood Lane we lived in at that time. Buster used to hang around our front porch the first few months after we moved into the house. My father didn't recognize the dog's name when I told him on the phone, but he said the connection was bad in those Virginia hills. I could see reception being bad where we lived, with all the trees and the church steeples blocking the sun, but I'd never thought Virginia was that hilly.

When we moved into Abby Lundy's old house, my father had just been promoted to manager of sales or something like that at the elevator company. I was twelve. The pay raise allowed us to move closer to town, out of that two-bedroom house on Chestnut Circle, and into a three-bedroom number on Redwood Lane with an attached garage and front and back porches. Though we didn't know this before we moved in, Abby Lundy's husband had just left

her, and she couldn't support herself, Buster, and the almost-blind mother that lived with her in a house of that size. Somehow my father worked out a trade, and I still think he knew more about Abby than the rest of the town did, but at any rate Abby, her mother and Buster moved into our old house.

Buster hadn't been back since about December of the year we moved into that house. I remember Mom wanting to give Buster some water when he wouldn't leave our back porch. "Then he'll be sure to come back," my father said. "He knows where his new house is. He'll understand in a few days." My father never knew that during those three or four months, if Buster stared at the back door enough, Mom would give in and feed him some leftovers. He also never knew that other times Buster just stayed long enough to pee on the wheel of his Ford truck and then disappear.

Mom came up to the door beside me and looked out at Buster, who lay still, not even his tail twitching. She just sighed. "I'm tired of thinking so hard." I assumed she meant about the fact that Dad was gone and Buster was here and she was paying for tango lessons with money we didn't have.

I said, "Do you think he's okay?"

She said, "I'm sure. He probably just recognizes this place. She hasn't let him out of that yard in years. He's fine."

We stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the screen door for a while, until my nose and fingers got too cold. Later, Mom called Abby, but there was no answer at her house.

The next day was Mom's first tango lesson, and she came home half an hour late. She came back with a smile seemingly plastered onto her face, wearing those exercise clothes I believed she'd had since before I was born. Her happiness didn't surprise me. She said the only other people in the class were a college girl and the old Braxton couple, who must have been in their mid-sixties then. She said they had all gotten along so nicely that the Braxtons had invited everyone, even Don, to their house for coffee afterward. She wouldn't stop talking about the class. She even promised to teach me what she learned, but then my father called and I answered.

"Taking what?"

"Tango lessons. Or, 'Latin-dancing' classes."

"Do you dance with Latins?"

"I think the word is 'Latinos,' Dad, but I've never met this guy. I mean, his last name's Schwartz."

"Your mama was dating a man named Jefferson Schwartz when I met her."

"His name's Don."

He didn't answer for a while.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"She seems really excited about it. I can't remember the last time I saw

Mom excited."

"Yeah," he said, and I couldn't tell if he was agreeing or if he hadn't heard me. "I'm assuming this costs money."

I paused, wrapping the corner of a dish towel around my finger as if it were the phone cord in an old movie. "Please don't tell her to stop, or anything. I mean, she didn't want me to tell you because she thinks you'd be upset."

Then he said it wasn't as if he could tell her what to do, especially from up in Virginia, and I thought I heard something wrong in Dad's voice, not exhaustion but something like it. I thought he might want to get off the phone so I said that he could go, and then he said, "Just keep tabs on your mother, dear."

"What for?"

"Just do. To make sure she's okay."

"Do you want to talk to her now?"

"No, it's all right. Leave her alone a bit."

Mom came home late from her second lesson. On her way up to the house, she said she saw something moving around the edge of the house, and she figured it was Buster. Then she saw what she supposed was a chipmunk, dead in the grass just beside the driveway. I was reading in the living room when she ran into the house. At the time, I probably thought it was just the chipmunk that had upset Mom, but now I think it might have been the lesson. I asked her why she was late again.

"We just got to talking," she said. She put her shoes in her bag.

"All of you?" I said.

She said it had just been her and the Braxtons—the college girl had dropped out of the class because, they were told, she didn't feel that she could continue the lessons and her schoolwork—then when the Braxtons left she talked to Don a little, just about me and how I was a top student and other things that I haven't been able to live up to since then.

"How old is he?" I asked.

Mom was in the laundry room, putting her exercise clothes in the hamper. She said she didn't know, that she suspected he dyed his hair black to hide some grays. "Maybe forty," she said. "Why?"

I didn't answer right away. Mom came out of the laundry room and asked if I had eaten the dinner she had put in the freezer for me.

"I don't like that you're going there," I said, surprising even myself. She asked what I meant. I said I didn't know.

"What don't you like?" she said, furrowing her brow in the way that annoyed me back then, a way that I thought made her look like a three-toed sloth. I wish I could take those thoughts back. Mom used to be pretty.

"I don't know," I said, gritting my teeth. "It doesn't matter."

She said of course it did. She asked me to sit down at the kitchen table and talk to her.

Then I said, "I just feel like we should be saving money now. I know how bad that sounds."

She placed her hands in her lap, and I braced myself back against the chair, preparing myself for some sort of news. "*I* never get to do anything," Mom said. "You and your father can go off and do whatever you want, but I am *always* in this house. I have to keep your father from buying things we don't need, and whenever I talk to anyone, they always tell me to go off and buy things for myself, to teach him a lesson. But I never do that. I have to do something for myself somehow."

Her eyes were boring into me, and I had to look down. I saw a scuff mark on the kitchen floor. I wondered which one of us had made it. Because I knew I was lying about my reasons, I couldn't keep my side of the argument alive.

"Okay," I said. I stood up. Mom sighed but did not say anything else. I went down the back hall to my room. I could have said that I was glad she always came back happy after the lessons, since I realized then that I hadn't seen Mom actually happy in a long time, longer than I could remember. I didn't say it was selfish for me to be jealous of Don, or rather, that I was feeling the jealousy I thought my father, who was not around, should have felt. I sat in my room for a while, thinking about my reaction before Mom gave her reasoning. I wasn't sure what I had expected her to say, why I kept expecting something bad to happen—I felt as if I were just waiting, not just for my father to come back, but for something that would change everything about the house we lived in.

I don't suppose Mom told my father that our neighbor Mr. Avery came over for dinner, either, and sat in Dad's usual spot at the head of the table. I think the chipmunk incident from the day before unsettled Mom a little—she asked Mr. Avery if he would clean the thing up, and then I suppose proper repayment for that would be to have him over for dinner. For the most part they talked as if I wasn't there. Just about stuff. The tango. The police station. He asked why Dad had been gone for two weeks, and Mom just told him he was thinking about joining his brother's charter fishing business in Virginia—she didn't tell him that he was just looking for any job, period. She also mentioned that Buster had come back and how he was acting strange and didn't come when we called him, and he didn't drink the water she had put out for him. Mr. Avery looked worried, and I sighed quietly and looked down at my plate, though I wasn't sure at the time why I was so annoyed. Mr. Avery said that we should be careful if Buster was acting strangely. He could be sick, he said.

"I just figured he was getting old," said Mom. "He'd be pretty old by now, wouldn't he, Judy?"

I shrugged.

"Make sure to call me if he starts acting aggressive, or if he won't leave," Mr. Avery said. "Or just keep away from him until someone can figure out if something's wrong."

I guess he figured we couldn't take care of ourselves unless he was around.

"I call his owner every time he shows up, but by the time she gets here, he's always gone," Mom said.

"Roaming?" Mr. Avery said, half-muttering, as if he were quoting an encyclopedia where he'd read up on the illnesses of dogs.

"I'm just wondering why he comes back here," Mom said.

"I figured it was because this place was the most familiar to him," I said, "and if he's really sick he might want to return to the place he remembers the best. Or the place his instincts remember." I don't know why I talked—perhaps I'd made my father's instructions a way of thinking, and now I brought up every problem I had with someone or their ideas.

Mr. Avery ate a little more. I didn't look up, afraid to make eye contact with my mother, since I figured she would not understand my actions. I sure couldn't understand them.

"I think we can handle ourselves," I said.

"Hopefully that's not the case," Mom said.

"Better to be safe," Mr. Avery said.

I looked at Mom, who was looking at her plate, and her face said she was trying to come up with another topic of conversation. Mom never was a good hostess even at informal dinners like that one—in large groups, my mother would often sit with her legs and arms crossed, tilt her head often, laugh awkwardly and too loud. Sometimes I caught myself doing the same thing. I felt bad for making the dinner uncomfortable and decided not to speak again. Then Mr. Avery said to Mom, "Does your husband even own a gun?"

"Who are we going to have to shoot?" I asked.

"I mean, in case that dog is mad," Mr. Avery said.

"I hope we don't have to take you up on your offer," said Mom.

"I doubt it," I said.

Shut up, I thought to myself, and resolved to keep my mouth shut no matter what.

"If the dog's been missing a while, it could be because he's sick," said Mr. Avery. I didn't care if he was trying to be kind to me, nor did I wonder why Mr. Avery irritated me so easily. Mom crossed her arms, even with her fork in her hand, and dropped some mashed potatoes on the floor. As she rose to clean it up I sat steeped in awkward silence, I heard from somewhere in the woods a painful, high-pitched barking.

Mom wasn't late from dance lessons the next week. Don drove her home. That would have been the night my father yelled at her for not checking the transmission fluid and letting the car burn out before it could be fixed. Don tried to siphon some transmission fluid from his car into hers, but that obviously didn't work. We got Mr. Avery to drive us to the car, which was parked beside Mitzy's Kitchen, a sort of greasy-spoon cafeteria Mom hated that was at least a few blocks from the dance studio. I wondered why someone from

Manhattan like Don Schwartz would want to go to a fatty, very Southern diner like Mitzy's.

She said that she had informed Don after that lesson that she was not going to return for the final tango lesson. She said he tried to argue with her, saying she was best in the class (she said of course she was, since the only other students were two sixty-year-old arthritics), saying that she couldn't get the down payment back anyway, but she said she didn't want the money back.

"You hate Mitzy's place," I said.

"I know," she said.

"So why did you two go?"

Mom said, "Judy, I'm too tired to care."

I said, "Tired of what?"

She said, "I think we should see if Buster will eat when we get home, if he's there."

My father had left a message on the answering machine when we reached the house, and since Mom said she didn't feel like talking to him, I angrily picked up the phone to call him back. Mom sat on the porch, though Buster was nowhere in sight.

"What's going on?" I asked my father.

"Oh, I'm just sick of looking around," he said. At first I could tell he was trying to sound nonchalant for me, but the longer he spoke, the more irritated his voice became. "Your uncle's not willing to give me a deal or a position that I'm qualified to take."

I said, "Mom's not going to lessons anymore."

"What lessons?"

"The tango lessons."

"Oh. Okay."

"We don't get the money back, though."

"Of course."

Mom burst in the screen door then and slammed the back door behind her.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," my father said. "I'm just tired."

Mom called Abby Lundy the following morning. Buster had been roaming our yard the entire night, howling and yelping. Mom thought he might have rabies. So did Mr. Avery. Abby spent at least an hour walking around the perimeter of the woods, shaking canisters of treats that she seemed to bring everywhere and calling out his name until it had no meaning anymore, was just a hodgepodge of sounds.

Right before my father called to say that the position at Uncle Jimmy's place had fallen through, along with his relationship with Uncle Jimmy, Mom went next door to tell the McAlisters not to let their cat out that day. Then I

guess Mr. Avery saw her—he must have had that day off—and came over to talk, and she told him about Buster. He walked back to the house with her. I had hoped that my father would find a job up in Virginia. I remember driving through the state's countryside in late winter, on the way back from Uncle Jimmy's, listening to "Lonely Teardrops" on the radio. Then, I had thought the weather seemed so much more normal than where I had grown up. The hills along the highway were brown, and I saw mountains covered in a fuzz of bare trees in the distance. The sky was pale, almost white. I thought it was beautiful. I didn't want to leave my best friends, but, I thought, at the same time we couldn't stay together forever, and it wasn't that important that we hang around each other all the time. I felt then that I'd been changing at that time and they hadn't. They couldn't understand why I didn't want to use the money I got from work to go to the movies (sometimes I suspected my boss and his wife gave me more than the correct wages when they paid me for overtime, but I never knew what to say to them about that).

When I went back outside, Buster was lying in the grass and Mr. Avery was gone. Mom had a pulled, wan expression on her face, and Abby sat on the steps of the porch, looking at Buster as if he were a magnet and she was trying hard to resist his force. That's, I guess, when I knew something was wrong, knew everything was wrong, and it felt like nothing would ever be not wrong anymore.

Mr. Avery walked around the house into the yard with his shotgun.

"Can't you call animal control?" I said, alarmed, knowing that the nearest animal control center was two towns over and by the time they got here, Buster could be gone or dying painfully.

No one seemed to hear me. Mr. Avery stopped at the edge of the lawn and took Mom's arm and pulled her back. Buster didn't turn his head. Abby Lundy started to cry. I just wanted Mr. Avery to stop touching my mother.

"Y'all should probably go in the house," Mr. Avery said. "In case he gets mean."

Mom waved at me and took a step toward the back porch. I couldn't seem to move my legs, though I knew it was too late to help Buster.

"Judy, follow your mother," Mr. Avery said.

Buster had pushed up onto his haunches and was looking around, as if he had no idea we were there. Mom took Abby's shoulder and led her inside the house, and I went inside with them. I walked toward the other end of the house, toward the front door, away from Buster and Mr. Avery's gun, then I kept walking. I walked down the driveway and onto Redwood Lane, and headed in the direction of Main Street. I clenched my fists when I heard, as I passed under the canopy of maples, a loud pop. When I heard the second shot, I began to run. I ran past the trees, skirting around town to avoid crowds, toward the country back roads where cars rusted on lawns and the church steeples blocked the sun.

Celeste Brewer

Faith

I am nine years old. My grandparents, Annie and Papa, are lining up to take Communion. Every other time I have been to church with Annie and Papa, I have had to kneel at the altar with my head bowed the way the other children did, waiting for the assistant pastor to lay her palm on our heads and bless us. This time, Annie has decided to let me take Communion with her. I haven't been to the church more than a few times a year since I graduated from the preschool in its basement. I don't even know the Lord's Prayer, let alone that you are supposed to get confirmed before you can take Communion. I just don't like being patted on the head by a stranger while Annie and Papa get to do something more important.

As the line moves toward the altar, I suddenly realize that I have no idea what I am supposed to do. I fidget, whispering questions to Annie, who stands in line in front of me. "I'll show you," she says.

I feel like the whole church is staring. My face goes hot, the way it always does under pressure, and I know it has turned a deep enough red to match the carpet on the aisle and altar. The faintest mist of sweat rises along my hairline. The seams of my blue rayon dress begin to itch.

Annie whispers, "Watch."

She kneels easily, for a seventy-three-year-old woman. She cups her palms the way she did beneath the faucet the night before, letting cold water collect in her hands before she splashed it onto her face. Instead of bowing her head, she looks up expectantly. I mimic her.

The pastor, who holds a silver bowl, raises his eyebrows at me. But I keep my hands out—partially because I am too scared to move—and he places something that looks like a miniature sand dollar in them. He murmurs something to me about the body of Christ. I don't understand. I expect the sand dollar thing to taste like Nilla Wafers, but it tastes like old Cheerios instead. The pastor turns to Papa, who has knelt with much greater difficulty on my left side. Papa, wheezing, manages to lift a single hand.

Now the assistant pastor stands in front of me. She holds a gold tray covered with tiny glasses full of what looks like grape juice. I am afraid she will recognize me as the same girl whose ragged blonde hair she used to flatten with her palm. But it has been months since she last saw me, and in any case, she seems distracted. She hands over a glass with only a quick look in my direction.

I sip from the glass: it tastes like Robitussin. I try tell Annie so, but she shushes me again. We both glance at Papa, whose jaw has begun to move.

"You're not supposed to chew it!" Annie hisses. So I try not to pull a face as the Robitussin mush slowly dissolves in my mouth.

When I was younger, I liked to play with Annie's Lutheran hymnal. Its plain green cover looked like the covers of the books Belle waltzed around the

bookstore carrying in *Beauty and the Beast*. A green and gold ribbon glued into the spine marked Annie's place, which I always lost because I enjoyed laying the ribbon perfectly flat between the thin, gold-edged pages, pulling it tight, and closing the book. Then I'd open it again, turn the pages, and repeat.

Annie seemed to think that my fascination with the hymnal was a sign that I was trying to reach out toward God. She asked me if I would like my own copy. I said yes, of course. A few weeks later, she presented me with another forest green and gold Lutheran hymnal, with my full name—Celeste Leigh Brewer—embossed in delicate script on the cover. I thought it was very pretty.

The hymnal was often a key prop when I played dress-up: the gold pages added that certain extra touch to my princess costumes. Sometimes I danced around with it, pretending I was Belle. Though I couldn't make much sense out of most of the hymnal's contents, I eventually discovered that it did contain the words to my favorite Christmas song, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." This excited me, since I only knew the chorus by heart.

I only went to church with Annie and Papa when my parents had gone out the night before. Instead of trying to find a babysitter, they sent my brother and me to spend the night with our grandparents, who would drop us off at home the next morning after church. I didn't have much choice in the matter: Annie and Papa went to church every week, so if I was at their house on Sunday morning, I did too.

I didn't find out until much later that there was more to the story. Annie and Papa were angry that neither my brother nor I have been baptized. Our family doesn't belong to any church—we sleep late on Sunday mornings. Mom says she doesn't remember a time when anything the pastor at Trinity said made any sense to her. Dad was raised Baptist, and though I've never been able to get the full story out of him, I know that he walked in on something ungodly going on between one of the deacons at his church and a fourteen-year-old girl.

One night, while my six-month-old brother slept in his crib, Annie and Mom argued over the telephone.

"I can't lie to my own kids," Mom said.

Annie wanted to know what made her so sure she'd be lying. What made her so sure she was right? What if her children went to Hell, and it was her fault?

So a deal was struck. In exchange for free babysitting on date night, Annie and Papa got to take their grandchildren to church the next morning.

I went to church a few times of my own volition, always on Easter Sunday. Mom refused to go, but Dad could always be talked into putting on a suit and a pair of cowboy boots (his version of dress shoes) and driving me downtown in the back seat of his old BMW at eight o'clock in the morning. I liked

church on Easter because Trinity hosted a breakfast before the early service. There, I could eat grits and biscuits with butter and jelly and wear my frilly white dress and ruffled socks for that much longer.

The dress was a gift Dad brought back from a business trip to Chile when I was five years old. It was the most expensive gift he'd ever given me, with puffed chiffon sleeves and several layers of tulle beneath the skirt. I thought it was beautiful. The dress was made to be a Catholic girl's First Communion dress, but I didn't know that. Mom wouldn't let me wear it except on very special occasions. I wanted to wear it on kindergarten picture day and to every birthday party I was invited to, but Mom told me no—church on Easter Sunday was the only occasion she agreed was special enough.

Trinity was gorgeous on those mornings, when the organist played triumphant hymns with such flair that I'd turn around backward in the pew to gaze at the organ's polished pipes. The acolytes carried brass poles that somehow lit the candles on the altar. Throughout the service, the sunlight gathered strength, illuminating panels of glass one at a time until blue-robed angels descended from the archways of every stained glass window. On the ceiling facing the congregation was painted, in Gothic script, "Holy Holy Holy."

"I'm guessing," said Dad, "The first 'Holy' is for the Father, the second is for the Son, and the third stands for the Holy Ghost."

Shortly after my impromptu first Communion, my friend Molly invited me to spend the night at her house on a Saturday night. Molly's family attended church as faithfully as my grandparents did, so I knew to pack dress clothes even before she told me.

After the service the next day, Molly said, "So, can I visit your church?"

"You mean my grandparents' church?"

She gave me an odd look. "No, I mean your church."

"Well," I said, "I don't really have one."

I told her what my mother had always said to say to people whenever I got caught in a situation like this one: that my parents disagreed with organized religion, and we preferred to express our beliefs at home. Of course, this philosophy of my mother's was only a small part of a larger piece of advice she repeated frantically before Easter, Christmas, and the beginning of a new school year: Never Tell People We Don't Go To Church.

Molly's eyes grew wide. "What do you mean, you don't have one? Like, you don't go to church?"

"No," I said. "I mean, I go with my grandparents sometimes. And my dad used to take me on Easter."

"That's bad," said Molly. "That's really, really bad."

"Well," I lied, "It's not like we don't pray at home. We do. All the time. I mean, you don't have to be at church to pray, right?"

Molly shook her head. "I think," she said, "you might go to Hell."

After that incident, I kept my secret. Whenever someone asked what church I went to, I didn't bother with the no-organized-religion speech. I just said Trinity, and hoped whoever I was speaking to didn't go there. This practice worked out fairly well for me until sixth grade, when several of my classmates and I were sitting together in the library.

Since it was the beginning of the school year—and an important school year, at a new school with a whole new mix of people—the question arose.

"So where do you all go to church?" Ally Truitt asked.

I suddenly realized that my old answer might not work anymore. When I turned ten, my parents decided to allow me to stay at home with my younger brother when they went out, so I hadn't been to church with Annie and Papa for over a year. Since I didn't know any of the other girls at all, what would I do if one of them said she went to Trinity, too?

I decided I'd wait until everyone else had named a church, and hope my luck held. That is, until Leah Yokel said, "I don't go to church."

"Oh, right," said Ally. The rest of the girls moved on as if nothing had happened. I was stunned. Why didn't they care? Would it be that easy for me, too?

"What about you, Celeste?" asked Marie Cudd.

"I don't go to church either," I blurted.

Everyone stared.

"I didn't know you were Jewish, too," said Leah. And right away, I realized my mistake.

"I'm not," I said, mentally kicking myself up and down the halls of the unfamiliar school. I tried my mom's old organized-religion speech, but I wasn't expecting it to work, and it didn't. It was like leaving church with Molly all over again. They asked me things like, "Don't you believe in God?" and "Aren't you scared of going to Hell?" Then the bell rang, and they left so quickly, I knew I shouldn't follow.

On the way home that day, I stared out the window of my neighbor's minivan at the clouds. I knew what they looked like from above, too. My first time in an airplane, I had peered out the window, searching for angels. I saw none, but the clouds were pretty enough anyway. As the sun rose, they glowed pink and gold and dusty violet. At church they said, God is in Heaven, and when I asked Annie where Heaven was, she said, "Above the clouds."

After that first flight, I asked Annie why I hadn't seen God above the clouds. She said I wasn't supposed to see him. I was supposed to believe he was there, and that was enough. And I tried, I really did, but I just couldn't.

Above the clouds were lots of things: layers of Earth's atmosphere, gradually thinning out until there was no air left. The moon, the sun, the planets, and the asteroid belt spun far above the clouds, in space—and beyond that were galaxies. Between galaxies, the universe expanded infinitely, stretched

above the cirrus clouds Annie called mares' tails. I could name a few galaxies, and the Crab Nebula, which I'd seen pictures of in National Geographic. Space lay above the clouds—but, according to National Geographic and every other science textbook I had ever read, space was aptly named. Space was nothingness: no air, no gravity, no light, and terrible cold. Space was not Heaven, and I could not believe anything like the thing Annie called God would fill it.

And as for Hell? Though I'd never been below the ground, I knew what was there, too. The mantle and the core were hot, thousands of degrees: too hot for anyone to burn there for eternity.

When I was very young, on Christmas Eve they told me, "Santa Claus will come down the chimney and bring you presents." So I crept from my bed and looked for Santa, but he wasn't there. A few years later, Mom told me, "Daddy and I are Santa Claus." The same thing happened on Easter. I never saw a giant rabbit in a pastel vest hop through the back door, though I did see candy in my basket on Easter morning. Again, when I asked, I was told, "Daddy and I are the Easter Bunny."

I began to think that maybe I didn't need to try to believe in God, either. I suspected it might turn out, once again, to have been Mom and Dad all along. Besides, if Heaven is joy and Hell is pain, then why can't watching the sunrise from an airplane window be Heaven? Why isn't Hell being left alone in a middle school library by the girls you hoped would be your friends? And why, after we die, are we supposed to stay in the same place forever, while the universe expands and tectonic plates shift and stars burn themselves away to nothing?

Cody Buchanan

Passenger Seat

I know my father through car trips. He's driving the back roads to Anderson: left at Whitefield Baptist Church and straight past the trees he says jump a little more over the fence every year. I am sixteen and it is the first week of summer. My father sings along with the radio in falsetto. I play a miniature air-drum set beside him.

Our trip to Savannah, Georgia is tradition. We've stayed at the same hotel on the last week of July for eight years: far down on River Street with big burgundy awnings seen from the Queen Elizabeth II as she passes by on the river. Eight years ago, I fell in love with how smooth the cement was around the edge of the pool as I walked laps while my mother and father discussed ghost tours. I heard the in-house pianist play "Moon River" by Johnny Mercer, whose grave was nine blocks over from our hotel. I'm still in love with that hotel.

The year my mother moved out, my father told me in the beginning of June to pack up an overnight bag and leave my cell phone at home. We drove the four hours to Savannah that afternoon. He packed us toasted cheese crackers and peanut butter sandwiches with short bottles of Diet Coke. He wanted to make the drive a straight shot. I had never ridden to Savannah in the passenger seat before. I was always in the back seat with my legs propped to the side. My mother refused to slide her seat up far enough for me to fit. I listened to the same conversations they had every car trip: home improvement projects they'd put off for years and my mother's complaints about her job. The passenger seat felt open. I stretched. As soon as the interstate mile markers told us we were halfway to Savannah, we rode with the windows down all the way into the city. With each mile the radio got louder, and my father traded the lyrics he did not know for "something, something, me and my big toe." He drug the word "toe" out in a big finish. We opened the sun roof and raised our hands as we drove over my favorite bridge. From far away, it looked like a big white sail boat floating across the Savannah River.

He got a henna tattoo three years ago at an outdoor market across from River Street. The design resembled a jagged flame climbing from the inside of his wrist to the crook of his arm. It took twenty five minutes and he told me to get him a cup of water so it looked like he had a beer to go along with his tattoo. He held the cup at his waist with the tattoo turned casually toward me. I took a picture. We walked, ate pralines, and got back in the car to drive the fifteen minutes to Tybee beach.

Some of the only pictures I have of my father are of the side of his face. I took them from the back seat, passenger side. There's so much change I can see in him over time just by that small portion of face. With each picture and each trip, his hair grows thinner and he changes from oversized striped polos

to fitted blue t-shirts. I told him blue and black made him look younger. He wears these colors more often. When we got into Tybee for the first time, he drove down the main strip with both hands gripped at ten and two on the wheel. He pretended to turn the car in abrupt motions and make engine noises with his mouth.

Back in Anderson, we drive past our house to the end of our road and turn around. I am confused and my father says, "I wanted to come home from a different angle."

There is only one place my father will eat pizza, at a restaurant in the mountains of North Carolina called Side Street Pizza and Pasta. Every other Saturday my father and I drive the hour and a half to this restaurant. He asks me the same question every time: "What'll it be today? White sauce or the sausage and mushroom?" I alternate answers, and tell him he's welcome to a piece of my pepperoni. I've never asked my father how he found out about this pizza place.

The day my mother left, she packed what remained of her winter coats into a box to sit in an apartment on N. Hamilton Street. My father wanted pizza. He wanted the drive more. I remember we did not speak much on the way there. The trees had started to look less dead and I watched the temperature drop on his in-dash thermometer. My father said, "Next winter we'll come up here and play in the snow before anyone back home even thinks about snow," then we went back to silence. We ate without completing a sentence, but on the drive home we saw a baby blue '69 Thunderbird. The beauty sat behind spotted yellow glass in a show room in the middle of an abandoned car lot. Vines grew up the sides of the glass. I thought how strange it was to have a classic car in what seemed to be good condition, alone in a run-down building in the middle of the mountains. My father pulled into the parking lot of a place that sold railroad ties and we walked over. The doors to the inside were locked. We stared at the car for a few minutes, wondered who would leave it here, wished we had the tenacity to steal it, and climbed back into my father's car. "When I was sixteen, I had a car just like that, except it was white. That car got me a date with the homecoming queen." I laughed because the homecoming queen now taught Computer Tech at my high school. He told me stories about my grandfather's station. My dad got to drink as many bottle Cokes as he wanted and he and his friends would play a game: the person with the bottle manufactured at the farthest place away gave a quarter to the person with the closest location. He told me a glass Coke was only good if the bottle had a half bag of peanuts in the bottom of it. I told him I wanted to try it and we stopped at four gas stations before we found one that sold glass bottles. I laughed out of jealousy at him. I wished my friends and I did things like that. I wished we spent our Saturdays walking around Pelzer and that we could pick up our lives and head to Myrtle Beach for the weekend

to see Herman's Hermits play at the Blue Note. I wished I had kept up my piano lessons so that one day I could be in a band that opened for Kiss and Styx and have my piano key broken by a member of Three Dog Night's heavy ring. I wished it hadn't taken my father fifteen years to tell me.

His job changed over to ten-hour shifts and since I was living with my mother in her apartment, I only saw my father when he came on Fridays to drop off my mother's groceries. My mother and I both tried not to be home often. She stayed out after work, and I stayed out with friends after school. When we both were home at the same time, there was always yelling. One Friday after school, I had my best friend drive me the ten minutes to my father's house. I opened the door and sat in my room for an hour until he came home, and though at first he seemed surprised to see me, he knew I would have ended up here sooner or later. He set his lunch box down, and I opened my mouth to explain. "You want some seafood?" he said. "I've been craving sea food." I smiled and put on an old t-shirt and sandals while my father changed out of his work uniform. I was sixteen, and we drove the four hours to Savannah, into the parking lot of a place called William's Seafood. On the drive there, we pretended we were back-road country singers and added a southern twang to every song we knew the words to. We sat in the parking lot of a Texaco for a little over an hour while my father spilled everything he ever knew about my mother. He told me the truth about why they separated, and I wished he wouldn't because I did not want to spend our trip angry. I didn't, though. I couldn't be. There was the promise of hush puppies and my father finally decided to let me try to run stage lights for his band after I spent half the trip begging.

I ate my weight in hush puppies and flounder filets while we were there. I gave my father all of my tarter sauce and I hogged the bottle of malt vinegar. We didn't leave Savannah until the early hours of the morning, around one or two. We stayed for a long time and watched the tug boats pull in and dock on the river. The night air never took the time to cool down. The metal bench felt warm against the back of my legs and when we got up to leave I could feel the sweat drip down to my ankles. We rode home with the windows down. The yellow and green lights of the interstate bent beams on my lap, and I told my father that one day I hoped I met a boy that would take me to Savannah. I hoped I would meet a boy that drove like my father. Someone whose car was too big for him, that waved at people at four way stop signs and sang loud and out of key. When I tell him I only enjoy sweet tea that tastes like syrup, I want to be in the passenger seat. We will be on the back roads to Anderson: a sharp right around the corner where I wrecked my first car and straight past Ashley Downs. I imagine a CD switching songs and I will give the same sideways glances my father gave me as he balanced the road and the conversation, one arm out the window.

Future of Sunday

I.
I used to believe only reeds hid the bottom lip
of the moon, the riot of seasons colliding. I welcomed it
with a shimmer of quakes: the rubber sole boots,
his father's dark green jacket, the cigar's tips dipped
in bourbon and honey. Blue, hard to navy, harder
to black. *My stars are here*, he'd say, *my stars*.

I tore the plastic off a new journal, just for him.
He lasted three pages. I lay us down and when
I wake, every page is him. *Fen*. I turn the page.
Fen. Quiet finger at the center of a mouth.

II.
How do we manage these gifts of the throat and tongue?

III.
We lie together for a matter of breaths. Slow,
slower, inhale—
And I realize he is nothing like sage. Moment
before sleep, all five of his fingers around my wrist,
everything is soft. Didn't we become the morning?
Bald peaches, our skin grew warm, melted.
His water bed drifted a current. Here, there was never leaving,
no spinning tires. Remember,
I pressed my face against the glass that day, saw nothing but a dining room.
No, he was where I last laid, enough to make him sweat,
move the beads on his bracelet back, forth, back, spin—

I wear his mother's shoes. Holes in the woods bag
dirt in my cuff, grey ankles. He tasted like sand,
cold smoke, boiled wheat. We chase after quails.
I'd never seen a quail before. We take in harsh air
and burrow beneath the leaves, full clay moisture.
We are nothing like the Isinglass, jade and moss.

IV.
Isinglass, I can't explain the tremors of feet—
I don't do it on purpose. I wish you could give
your cold trenches to the swamp, so that he may see
he's hidden so much more than reeds; I have misplaced

my fear of compassion, and the dim mud and wet margarine
air quiver without touch. I wish I could recall the wings
in your soil, their mouth-to-mouth, their silhouette.

Funny, new ink doesn't drip. Fat words
on the silver of my tongue, million miles,
twisted sound. *Fen*. The day I raised two arms,
became a pedestal. Hair,
violently woven jewelry, the nose of a circle,
Codeine, the numb drug I was named for.
I can't write his story. Too many pages
for these too few words. What do people
morph out of? I don't remember the time,
position of sun, just that I did not want
him to stop counting breaths.

V.
(If you cannot remember wading between
two Bald Cypress', cannot listen to a word
like fen without a secret scold, flowing
silver dress. Sleep inside the thickness of pages,
their repetition: n, n, n,
now is not my orchid. Words of shells, words
of earth, pull down the bottom lip of the moon
and drink her fuel. Burst, and then…)

VI.
We will lend our palms to the grasses.
Let me catch a breath—we are alive,
only souls. You, my favorite shirt, devil's
den. December feels like dresses above
the knee. I still have eight months
to write all our failures; the time we ended
in West Greenville and told our fathers
it was a mistake, long path, splintered train,
too bad that man was cutting grass. Or,
switching, I wore his oversized jacket
in September, the one he bought in Wisconsin.
We sat on steps in a graveyard
(Camden, Campbell, Carr) and told secrets
to the stones. I said, I'm scared *I'll never slow down*,
lie down, hips together, sometimes all the grey in the world
blends.

VII.
Isinglass, I wrote myself like sap.
Like—cut open a tree and gush that color,
one color, run like that—
against
behind
Fen
Crab cages, I won't trip on you. Something
pretty for you, unlatched fever, we come
together to make a corner. Your body arching
over, I tell you about when I was mine.

Wherever he is, I've left the reeds.
The idea makes me swell. *Fen*, no.
He tells me he'll move back home
when his parents lower themselves beneath
the patch of red peppers, yellow, green,
next to the potatoes. And all of the warm wood,
soft, will be us.

Allen Butt

Poem for the Wind

Still slow enough for silence, you who have hidden
So long in your nakedness, breasts
Only of motion, enter my sight, now, if fed
A handful of dust. Dumb wind, when you can, give voice
To the errant heartlessness that ails you—
Offer yourself up to gliding birds, whose patterned declination
Will define the bounds of these virginal, aching jaunts.

The Barnacles in Okinawa

Light softens sometimes. What once bore
holes in anthills glides over grass.
Best, now, to watch people pass
& wish to know their lives.
(Whoever surveyed these fields
was wholly malicious.
Let me renounce this plow.) I knew a girl
intent on self-destruction,
who longed to bury herself
under rocks & mulch. To return her beauty
& unhappiness to earth. I hollowed spaces
in my knuckles & my calves & feet,
& I put there small sculptures of her body.
She repossessed them; I was, in their absence,
a sum of spaces where, at night, crickets
crawled & slept. As my body grew back,
those creatures were trapped inside me.
I assimilated them into myself
& paced down the grass of a single mile.
—Look, she said, I have shattered all I was
before your feet. And I wanted
to reach my hand toward her,
to determine that, at least, her life was hers.
All of this was a forest. Now,
the buildings of the South rise behind me,
there are no decisions finite enough to make. Her skin
stretches out before me like a bedsheet,
quilt of the waning moon. I have let it,
too many times, distract me. I think of Greek jars,
once vessels for priceless olive oil—now gone—
finally admired for their beauty. In this way,
the vulgar dies, & leaves behind it
knowledge. That things mean nothing but themselves,
that they are only valuable for what they are.
This world . . . it doesn't hold much.
Hardly a thing. The great pain of this life
is being in it. We are confined to what we are,
like barnacles clinging to a ship's hull.
Then I remember when my father pointed out
the barnacles on an Okinawa sea-wall.

I thought they were rocks, which seemed
the only way things could be fixed, as they were,
to the ocean's edge. My father smiled and corrected me.
—Those are animals, he said. They're alive.
And they can prick you.
I watched water hit the breakers,
& did not think—though I should have—
how strange it was that they could cling like moss
to rocks half worn away by years of waves.
The worst thing is being in it—the finality of bodies.
That we can never know a thing
except ourselves. Grass, grow in me;
mole, make me your home. Burrow through these
closing cavities, make water of light hardening to stone.

These Hearts

In a parked car near the Georgia border, at the warehouse
Where boys in clothes too loose for them buy fireworks,
Rain obscures sight past the windshield. It is difficult
To see inside the building through the tall windows.
There are few trees here. Autumn's presence goes largely unfelt.
Inside, they purchase means to shape earth, the opportunity
For progress—fire that can push the air outward—Phaëtons,
Children with quick-burning ambition in every muscle
That twitches idly in their bodies. I cannot see
My father, though I know he is within: Perhaps the sum
Of colored light my eyes accept contains his image,

But he is lost, now, to me.
                There was a stirring.
Trees found the earth they sprung from inhospitable
& allowed their knowledge & certainty to be
Scattered on the visible wind—To-morrow to fresh
Woods—scattered, as leaves in October—and pastures new.
Think how once I drove with him, the man now in the store,
Through Maryland, & the leaves were torn (it seemed
As much by the car's speed as by the wind without)
From their branches—tomorrow to fresh—& he said,
Look, all is dying back into itself, marble hands clasped lifelessly
In prayer, & it is beautiful—yet leaves & wounded faith
Could not, in October, mend these hearts. So we drove,
—& pastures new—O rainfall, in silent expectation,

Perhaps of lovers, perhaps

Only of knowledge.

Now.—They place their fireworks in bags, they walk
Back out into the rain for cigarettes. I lock the car door,
Wait in silence for my father that in silence
We might leave.

Back Yard in Light Rain

The morning after I fall asleep
On vicodin, my mind again at rest,
I sit at the back porch & watch Canada geese

In the pond behind our house. Their nests
Are somewhere near here. And if my mind
Should wander now, I'd ask them, Is it best

That I sit safely here, behind
The porch screen? Safe from mosquitoes,
I watch rain brush pines

& magnolias, elms, young oaks.
Beneath each tree's stasis
Are sap, insects, fungi, mold,

Parasites: life that robs places
Of life. All the same,
Branches foster it, bragging of birdnests, braces

In a shared construct. (I think of grain
At my mother's ancient family's farm,
All dead before my life began.)

And yet to love this only for its charm
Is a disservice. Ultimately, I know
I have tried to wield my life thus far to harm

Myself. I don't deny it. Grow
what you can while you can. Then sleep.
I believe this now. In my allotted time, I'd like to show

The hummingbird bending to our cheap
& gaudy feeder—he bends his beak
To food-colored sugar-water, & takes a deep

Sip, struggling admirably against the rain.

Sarah Carnick

Surviving as the Youngest in an Enormous Catholic Family in the New South

Start with divine purpose, immortality, or—if these are out of your price range—go with good, old-fashioned luck. Never claim to have this advantage to family members, because information among blood gets around almost as fast as shame. Avoid ever thinking you are kept safe by luck. There will never be a point in your life when you are safe, because the second you think something along these lines, you will be corrected.

Next, be double-jointed, but keep it as your secret weapon. Tell no one. If you are not born with this gift, don't worry, you will develop it. Also, if you can manage, don't be ticklish, and if you are, then you should join the track team for practice.

You should remain aware of the fact that in water you are still ticklish. Lock the bathroom door. If any of your siblings are creative, don't think for an instant she'll be too shy to run and tickle you right in the middle of a bath. Have breathing exercises outside of the water, so if you are attacked later, it won't be so difficult for you to survive.

Never think you are too old for revenge. When you're seventeen and your sister hits you in the face with a pillow, wait behind her bathroom door twenty minutes before she goes to bed. Then smack her in the face as soon as she enters.

The next time you examine the dog hair on the stairs that you are supposed to be vacuuming, avoid standing on the top step and facing down. You are a prime target at this altitude, and gravity always applies. Don't assume since you do not have any male siblings things will be any less violent. You are just as likely as anyone else to be struck in the back of the knees by a wooden katana.

If your brother or sisters tell you to eat it, don't. If they tell you it's poisonous, eat it. If you think your family is an honest one, you are an idiot. When you are three and tricked into eating dog food every few days for a year, you'll learn this. If you didn't mind the taste of dog food, don't inform your family. Save the story for later years to share among friends and cheer up strangers who are forced into awkward elevator situations with you.

Don't trust anyone, but be trustworthy. Even if the other kids tell your parents everything, don't do the same. Revenge is only good to a certain point. But that early morning will come when you discover life isn't really about big fish vs. little fish. Rather, it is an after-school special's idea of the children vs. the parents. When all of the kids figure this out, you won't want paranoia being your biggest problem.

Stay out of obviously harmful situations. For example, if you hear someone yell "WWF," run. The last time you heard someone yell this, you watched your brother run past you with a metal folding chair toward one of your sisters who was reading on the couch. Your sister got out of the way in time and ran for only a few minutes before she realized the house had a surplus amount of what can be used as homemade weapons. Then you watched as she clothes-lined your eldest brother with your dead grandmother's wooden cane.

Tape your brother when he sings "You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman," and walks around the house wearing heels. You'll need it later.

Keep your oldest sister's remaining Barbie that has a burned match still stuck in the right breast. Study from time to time the random assets which are melted, deformed, or missing. Recall when you were four and your oldest sister was angry at your mom so you and all the other kids helped her build a bonfire of Barbies. Your sister explained how this somehow made her point. Think how afterward, she tacked this Barbie up against the wall in her closet by its hair.

Keep your oldest brother's pongs. Think about how he used to tell you they were worth money and would let you rent them an hour at a time in exchange for a quarter.

And keep your second oldest sister's Tinker Toy that has one of the circle connectors missing. Remember when your brother punched the connector while your second oldest sister was holding it and she somehow managed to choke and had to go to the hospital.

While you're at it, keep your other brother's baseball cards that he would let you play with if you washed your hands, the rock your other sister painted for you when you were an infant as a present on your birthday, and the pictures of your sister right after she got her stomach pumped for eating the bottle full of dog heart pills when she was a child.

One day you will finally be old enough to understand all the sick jokes, to drink, to smoke, to laugh at the pain, and to miss your childhood. Somehow all the kids will manage to regroup, and you will all end up on your father's back porch at four in the morning. No one will be sober, and no one will really be happy. You'll relive everything you wanted to forget, and realize one of your sisters has no idea what her childhood was like. You'll laugh without humor when she threatens to repress you if you don't be nice to her.

You'll laugh about how she can't tell anyone anything, and she likes it that way; how your eldest sister almost got raped when she was ten because your parents made her walk four miles to school, and when she told them, they didn't believe her and continued to make her walk. How your youngest brother does too many drugs and drinks too much. You'll discuss how coffee doesn't stunt your growth, but pot sure as hell freezes your ability to mature.

All that you've forgotten will flash through your mind every time you see your parents' faces for the rest of your life. You still won't have gotten over what happened during childhood; you just acted as if it wasn't there. You'll realize you've pretended that who you live with now isn't who you were raised by. You'll think back to a year ago, when the drunken old woman who tried to sleep with you was your mother, and how the person that took acid and beat your oldest brother was your father.

You'll smoke with your sister and end up screaming as loud as you can about how your parents aren't great, aren't who they pretend to be. When you think about everything, you'll scream about how all of you are bastards, and how your parents were horrible in every way. In the end, with everything that has happened, all of those you've seen enter then leave your life, and the lives of all the kids, you're still breathing. And you're only breathing because your sister let you vent about everything that has happened. You'll see that these "annoying kids who never leave you alone," these people who have watched you grow and who have been one of your biggest threats in life, the ones who can never understand you're position in the family, are the only survivors who will ever understand you in the least.

And then there are snake bites, leeches, and dust-storm burns. But there's really no cure for any of that.

Matt Casedonte

St. Francis in Meditation

After Francisco de Zubaran

Behind you, hallways stalk the walls, thresholds sliding across
the background, beckoning in the language
of birds, long forgotten in the time of hunger, bile, and tears.

I think of you when I think of her, the girl
in the sundress—wind wedding fabric to flesh—
flat across the slope of her back, leaving only the promise of thighs

A beautiful plain girl. There was just her, and visceral attraction.
I know it was nothing more than lust, but it was desire all
the same. There was no need for names. It wasn't love

but nature. Fantasies hung aloft in the air like a mobile
of possibility, each one's value diminishing as the numbers do.
Why must we go and name everything, bothering to quantify.

Yahweh. How far we have fallen, named namely
because someone was named that name before.
But here, in this moment, there is something.

There is a girl, a building that she studies with the eye
of the birds you called to in hopes of finding God, oblivious to me.
There is nothing beyond the bits of sidewalk we stand on.

Nothing else matters. There is only the abyss behind our perpendicular gazes,
the abyss that knows some part of me is looking beyond her flesh,
into her, into it and the abyss that is a part of us.

Now is not for speech. Now is when we carve ourselves
from marble, crafting God in our image, His face the shifting architecture,
the knotted rope around the lecherous waist of the erratic monastery.

In View of Eden

"I am waiting to be rearranged by the hand of God."
-Terrance Hayes

I wander valleys out west where
His hand mined out miles of sand
only to scatter the tragically
useless stone across a landscape.
I deal with the hatred and rage that
whips around in myself like desert winds
by pushing it outwards, trying to temper
myself into a stronger sort of steel.
I want to hurl myself, recklessly,
into the future, if only to see who,
when we collide, is the first to break.
Human hands, in view of Eden,
sketched outlines of what they saw
so far off in the distance.
What became the steel-wire-intricacy of skyscrapers
    the snake-tunnel-dream of subways
    the stamped-earth-resilience of law
began as primal blueprints of Babel
erected in the dirt of futile effort.
I don't want to be the artist
but the drawing made of mud and prayer,
burning its way into the collective dream-
time of a people. This is not vanity. This is
arête. This is the struggle with the self,
the despair of haggard cliffsides scaled
by men desperate to make themselves,
through the marring of God
and His own creation, immortal.

The Skinhead Drinks Mocha Frappe

Maybe it's his steel-toed combat boots caked in mud, work pants full of holes, or his stretched-out, dirty wifebeater. Maybe it's his head, shaved bald and highlighting his gauged ears. Maybe it's the fact that he can never sit still, swinging his wallet chain in coils around his fist. When I talk with AJ on the patio of Books-A-Million's coffee shop, people who don't know him won't come outside. They walk to the glass door, look out at us, then scamper back towards the racks of *People* and *Us Weekly*.

AJ is a self-professed skinhead. He laughs about being stereotyped as some thick-skulled bigot. He doesn't have a criminal record. He tries to get our Jewish friend Will to stop smoking. "For your health," AJ says. He discusses bars with Phil and is unfazed when Phil begins talking about boyfriend troubles. Instead of *Mein Kampf*, he reads Langston Hughes.

Ask him about it, and he'll tell you where skinheads actually came from. How the stereotype has overshadowed the lifestyle. How skinheads rose out of the mod culture in the 1970s. How they took the style—checkered patterns, world music, tailored suits—and applied it to the working class. Hair was cut short for fighting, suspenders replaced suits and steel drums gave way to hardcore punk. Being a skinhead is not a political statement towards either the left or right. It's not a sign of belonging to a gang of blood-thirsty racists. "Skinheads don't hate Jews," he says, "*assholes* hate Jews."

AJ and I walk across the parking lot to the patio when a battered red sedan pulls up. Duct tape covers one headlight. The broken sunroof is sealed by more duct tape and a piece of tarp. A pale teenager with half a mustache rolls down his window and yells "Nazi faggot!" before hurling an Arby's cup at AJ. The plastic cup hits him in the chest and explodes in a shower of iced tea. The car races off as AJ strips off his new leather jacket. He never even considers chasing them down. We take the jacket to his van and pat it down with a roll of paper towels, not even trying to tear off individual pieces. We dry the jacket and head back to the patio. On the way, he stops and picks up the cup, throwing it in a trashcan. "The least they could do is throw away their trash," he says.

I ask AJ why he subjects himself to this. He could grow his hair out. He could put up his leather jacket and buy a windbreaker. He could shelve his boots and start wearing sneakers. AJ says that at some point he'll grow out of it, get a desk job, and clock in for the next forty years. He says that's not what it's about. It's about perspective. Dressing this way bothers people. It makes them uncomfortable. Then, he makes them comfortable. He makes them reassess. He makes strangers adjust their reality. The old conservative woman. The gay Southern teenager. The suit-clad, pink-slip-wielding business man. He's conquered them all. He tells me that, for him, it's a challenge. He tries to open their eyes a little, even if just for a moment. AJ changes just a little piece of these people's world, forcing them to remember something we all forget

from time to time: mankind's ability to surprise us. AJ and I sit on the patio of Books-A-Million. I blow on my coffee to cool it down, but AJ just sips on his mocha frappe. We're both waiting for people to show up—him for his sister to get off work, me for two of my friends whom I haven't seen since they left for college. My friends show first, ordering drinks then walking out onto the patio to join us. They crowd around me on one side of the table, even though there's ample space next to AJ. One of my friends whispers, "What's his deal?" AJ reaches out his hand, and introduces himself. My friends stare at him warily, but all AJ can do is laugh.

Tori Cole

An Empty Lake in Fairplay, Colorado

When spring comes again, Matt says,
It will be different. He has always lived here.
He understands the dry chill that sticks
to bones, the startling cold.
People who live here move with ease—
snowshoes, chained tires,
Marlboros, frozen fruit, mountain views.
My taut skin—I wonder for how long
it will fit these bones.
When I wake up, there is blood in my nose
where the skin has cracked.

We are more than a mile
above sea level now.
The lake is all dried up.
It will fill, he says,
with the same water that is frozen now.
The past becomes inextricable.
The lake fills and fills again
until everything spills over.

The locket around my neck will not
come undone.
Everything that was is in collision
with everything that is,
everything that will be.
The glaciers are shifting. Winter
fractures. *Up here*, Matt says, *everything breaks
in two.*

Winter Sea Poem

for Jasmine

Where you live, salt water collects
on the leaves. A coastal roar
hangs in the air. We watch
winter constellations
through a fogged window.
This is the way in which
we carry one another.
You do what you can
to keep me breathing.

My heart feels tight
in my chest these days,
because of the way
life is closing in on itself.
We are at an age at which
choices matter. Soon
we will be leaving one another.

Certain things make me feel new:
ironing a shirt, your arm—
the way it hooks in mine.
Champagne bubbles rising
into the night.

Cold weather birds
flock outside our window.
You feed them fragments of
tuna sandwiches tenderly
as I look on.

Deluge

The moon has exhausted itself.
It has filed itself down to a crescent

and will hover, some giant's thumbnail,
cotton-pulled clouds—

There is inevitability to this, of what is dictated to us
in the order of things: God as a force rather than a being:

that, the most terrifying thing. Forces have
no stores of mercy: a tornado sweeping whole

carpets of sown grass seed, fence posts pulled from the earth
like bad teeth. The river swelling, swallowing a woman

whole. Knowing you will not be spared.
What you love will not be spared.

Earthshake, Downpour, Fieldburn—
these are things we will not allow ourselves to forgive.

There is a mindlessness, perhaps, to this:
there is no one to forgive. The edges, rocks, ridges

will erode. Elemental rage. The loss
of something to no one.

The line "You will not be spared. What you love will not be spared," is adapted from Louise Glück's "October."

Nick Condatore

Creation of Man

Human—spirit held by skin,
created when God pulled Clay
up out of the newly-wrought waters
in a marriage with Smoke.

Clay's fluid body gave Smoke room
for her tendrils to explore,
and her weightlessness allowed Clay
to rise, trusting her guiding arms.

As Smoke rose, she gained momentum
and Clay stretched up from the Earth
like a hand toward the stars,
and he covered her—an embrace
of protection and love.

As the lovers approached the sun,
Smoke was unharmed, but
Clay, calloused from the heat
Smoke had known at birth,
and could not travel any farther.

Smoke stopped, allowing herself
to stay within Clay's palm,
intensifying every movement,
softening his toughened rind
—an angel caught in skin.

Disrespect Remains

I know your haunted past
how things turned out for the worst
at every turn, and that you made mistakes,
but if I'd not found out
it's hard to believe
things would have turned out differently.

I don't want to exemplify
you. I never have, and
I never will, though at times
it might be the smarter choice.

You can keep secrets
and one of the best
—your number—
makes me cringe.

You glue the worst of yourself
onto those around you.
All I can ask is, *why?*
But I know the answer:
you were wired wrong,
stenciled together
from tattered cloth,

and when you die,
I will towel you
and hold you close,
but until then, mother,
you deceive yourself.

From *All Bottles Lead to the Back of the Bus*

I was going south to Florida, so I could visit my dad over Thanksgiving break. My parents were finalizing papers and things for their divorce that would be signed legally sometime in March, and my dad had no one with him for the holidays. He said he would look into plane tickets and bus schedules to see if I could go down and see him for a few days. He asked me which way I wanted to travel, and I said whatever was cheapest. We both thought busses would be like those in Europe, so he bought me a Greyhound ticket from Greenville, South Carolina to Atlanta, and from there to Orlando, where he would pick me up.

I figured that a travel bus was like a high school bus and that the back was relatively empty. Other people think this too and by the time you reach the back you see there's few if any seats available. The person behind me was trying to reach the back too, so I couldn't turn around. I found a seat next to an angry looking man. I asked if I could take the seat next to him and he stood up to let me in. He seemed put off that I took the time to put my computer in the overhead storage. Once I sat down, I knew why other people hadn't taken the seat. The guy in front of me had his seat all the way back, basically resting his chair in my lap.

Plastic bottles kept rolling back to where I was sitting and bumping into my feet. I could hear more bottles rattling against each other under my seat against the wall of the bus's bathroom. Eventually, all the bottles on the bus would end up back here, I thought. The slight tilt on the bus made it easy for clean-up crews to grab the trash and leave, making way for the next group of passengers only minutes after the previous group got off.

When I finally arrived in Orlando around 7 A.M., I had to wait a while for my dad to get there to pick me up. We had arrived an hour early and he had slept through my phone calls. I grabbed a bite to eat at the Greyhound food franchise which has a menu of six items all made with varying amounts of powder. It was powdered eggs, powdered coffee creamer, and probably powdered bacon by the taste of it.

My dad arrived and walked in. He saw the place and looked surprised. He helped me carry my stuff to his truck. "That was so much nicer than the other stops," I said to him. Later, he told me, the way I'd said that made him feel really bad for making me ride the bus. He'd thought the Orlando stop was terrible, and when I said it was far nicer, he was a little shocked.

We left the place and made our way to Glenn and Debbie's, whose home my dad was staying in. I took a short nap before we left to visit the Reeds. They were friends of ours from when we'd lived in Clermont. Their family went to our old church, and their granddaughter, Lauren, had been one of my sister's friends in the youth group. Her father, J.R., was an unlikable guy that drank too much and acted chummy so you'd pick up his tab.

We got there and J.R. was outside, already drinking. He immediately took us inside and had me play "I Can Only Imagine" on the piano. He has me do this every time I visit. Because I play it every time I'm there, no one cared to say how good it was. I was rusty anyway, and J.R. was the only one who cared to listen.

My dad told me there was someone he wanted me to meet. My mom was leaving my dad for a boyfriend she had in South Carolina, and he had been very depressed for the past few months. A friend of the Reeds—a woman named Susan—had caught his eye, and she flirted with him, making him feel better about himself. He said it made him feel good about himself knowing he was still "desirable." She had a son a year younger than I, and they'd gone to our church several years before we left for the Carolinas.

She was a nice woman, and beat everyone at Clue multiple times. I couldn't remember her very well, but her son, Travis, I recognized immediately. His dad had cheated on Susan and divorced her so he could marry a nineteen year old girl. Travis and Susan seemed like nice enough people, and by the end of the Thanksgiving celebration I felt okay with them. It was still awkward when she would flirt with my dad, but that was expected.

The next morning my dad told me that after eating dinner with my sister, my mom had gone out with her friends, leaving Maria at home. Mom had said she wouldn't be out too late, but called at 3 A.M. to tell Maria that she was too drunk to drive back. Both of us found this weird because she'd been drunk many times, and had never pulled this excuse. My dad said she was probably at her boyfriend's house. I felt bad for my sister because I hadn't been there.

I took a plane back up to Greenville. I had Ford, a good friend of mine, drive me from the airport. He took me first to Claire's house, since that was where he had been when I called for the lift. I sat down at Claire's old, beat up piano, and started playing "I Can Only Imagine," because it was the only thing I knew very well. This time, unlike at the Reeds' house, I actually wanted it to sound good. Claire's sister ran into the room exclaiming that she "loves this song" and then walked into another room only half way through it.

There was no J.R. making me continue playing. I just wanted to, to make everything stand still for a moment in my mind and stop traveling. I thought about the bottles on the bus that had all rolled back to the same place. How they had to be kicked and prodded by feet all the way back. I didn't want to stop because I knew minutes after I stopped playing, Claire and Ford would take me back to school and new problems and anxieties would rise up. I had forgotten how little work I'd done on my homework over the break. I'd forgotten about having problems with my roommate. I just wanted things to pile up and stop moving, even if time continued. I wanted the moment to be frozen in place, lingering. I just wanted things to be as simple as the bottles at the back of the greyhound busses, and for the couple of minutes I played, they did.

Andrew Durbin

Primavera

It was out in the mountain valley when the trilling
Of several birds first led me, note after note
Into the various tonalities of night, and
Music that took of wind. How you, the one
Who first sent me out to see what a clear
Night sky was, taught me to count each individual cry
As it sounded into what could be otherwise
Called a thoughtless evening, drifting forever
Out from us—how I was pushed into that
Loudness of birdsong and the myths
We both knew of. Yet there was little
We understood when we went out into
The mountains, falling into another
Hopeless silence—we lost ourselves, nearly
Forever in the fluttering of spring as it
Came upon us—of course we tried to pull
Against the page, but as always were
Eventually drawn into it. So it seems
Nothing is gained by this, as we pick
The tiny white flowers from our hair, the few
Stray weeds we'd passed through while
Moving to hide. My only reasoning is that,
When it rained, no moonlight passed into
The woods, and in the end, neither of us enjoyed
The company of the other, as the leaves
Clung to our legs and we took cover beneath
An outcropping of stone. Do you remember
Francesca's argument, what she said
In defense of her and her lover, knowing
The gentle rush of it, how guilt and pity
Can snag on the branch at some same
Moment. If we are to believe her and
The myth of Guinevere to be true, then she
And all of us should be warned that none
Drift into that realm without consequence,
For, reader, this woman did not suffer alone,
Nor did the abandoned Elaine, as she drew over
Her robes, and later, traveled down the Thames
In her makeshift coffin, escorted by the swans
That always gathered in the reeds, bearing
What was left of the secret with her—No,

We know all of this secondhand: that
There were flowers in her hair and
Night moved along the river, that only
The wind knew of her privacies, like the care
She took in threading the daisy chain crown
And the folds of her linen burial shroud,
Pressed by her loyal maidens—oh, we
Shall not hope to see ourselves reflected
Into this, upon the stone, by strange light,
Passing into these shades beneath the rocks,
Drawing closer as the page unfolds
Before us to whisper her prayers—

Night Music

—Now that there is some moonlight we can trade our myths of the past.
Of course, there was an owl outside the window
To show us that the savage moon casts a shadow and
That from it we can hear musicians playing irreverently,
As though from another room. Morning is not so far that
It can be ignored any longer—the music of your crying falls note by note
Until it forms—what? What would the poem call it?—
The photograph of your father above your bed is something
Of an heirloom that poetry cannot answer for. The pull of
Its gravitas in your sleep deepens—a reverse dream catcher,
The magnet of nightmare where disaster is not an end, but
A setting down of possible conclusions—some last statements
On meaning. There is beneath this an understanding
That the spirit is strengthened for it all—a few reluctant birds
Fly across the window. What matters least now is that we hardly
Know one another anymore. The owl moves as if to sleep—

As Into Air the Purer Spirits Flow

after Alexander Pope

Staring into the river, I think of a boy I knew
Who lived in this country, how we once lounged
Here, on the rocks, listening to his father's music as it
Trailed from the farmhouse, as pollen dust blew
Off the water—now yellowed upon the waves—
I thought that the poem could answer for his leaving,
Intimate a greater meaning of some hidden world,
Unwavering in the spring air, memories recalled
Only by chance, hearing the sounds of his childhood home.
In this phasing afternoon light, the poem moving
Toward verisimilitude, I hear the vague noise that
Rose from his farm—the distant cows, how
He complained that they kept him awake at night
—The truth in the poem can be found, if it is there
At all, in some of night, as once, when I was younger,
We walked out into the fields, and fed the dogs
The last few pieces of stale bread. Perish poem,
These words I wrote out with my hand, do not justify
A yearning for more earth, a reason to even speak,
And perish all whose breast ne'er learn'd to glow.
I understand now that, when we sat in the grass and
Waited for the sun to rise, out past the farmhouse,
He didn't mean to lead me again into another
Empty morning, only to disappear into the dark
Forever, all for my having turned to look back
At him as the first traces of sunlight caught
The beauty of his face. No, it seems that was not
His intention, though it worked itself out in that way
Regardless—it's best just to say that the river
I reach into for a stone to throw, runs down
The mountainside, into those same fields, and
That the making of the poem is always elegy,
And notes only the transience of the event it records.
The few trees among the cows in the fields
Seem to sing when breezes pass through them,
A reaching out to music, and at his funeral,
They were adorned with black shawl—wind caught,
A few flew out past us, into the fields of grain—
The ground now sacred by thy reliques made,
All to suggest meaning, something to equip

The spirit—earth allow thee room, grieve
For a year, perhaps—in the end, it seems the
Ideas I gathered met the false understanding of
His failing me, that I caused him to fade from
The morning, that he reentered the fields and
Passed into the shades through a fault of mine—
Forget that the poets themselves must fall
Like those they have sung—for he is somewhere
Past this, near the image of earth—

Elizabeth Estochen

Decay of a Place

"What others found in art, I found in nature.
What others found in human love, I found in nature."
–Louise Glück

When you're jammed in the snow
in the sick suspension

between the rigidity of winter
and the vibrations of spring

truly see, then tell me how you feel.
When you look down at the sprouts between your muddy shoes

like the sloppy birth of a planet—
when you smile at the wet gray sky that'll never change—

is it the dying snow that fills you up?
Or just the feeling you'll be swallowed whole.

I admire your transcendental efforts,
your honeysuckle voice

but Louise, when I think of you coated in that cold,
when I think of your shell that takes in the earth, but will not fill,

I cannot relate

and like everything in my life before me—
I cannot believe.

Tenth Birthday

For example:

Every girl linked arms and spread across the pool like an oil spill.
My seven-year-old future stepbrother yelled across to us—
I don't know what we were trying to keep him from.
Pizza boxes melted into the plastic chairs
flies swam through the heat
the leftover cake like a head
and my father stood with him, not knowing what else to do
but laugh.
The boy began crying—
when did it first seem pointless to describe that sound?
When my ears thumped so hard, I couldn't hear?

But the girls just shouted louder.
Mine echoed off the walls of the pool,
and I laughed so hard
as he cried, *let me through*
oh please let me in
but I was deaf.

Progression

Listen. I want to stuff a walnut between your teeth
or pluck the adam's apple like a word from your throat
and suck out all the innocence
to run through my blood.

When I say, *you're good for me*
I mean there is you when there is no one
and your bones that just start to show.

I don't know how to make you feel safe.
How do I build myself up
when the foundation shatters
every time it's touched.

How I could begin to tell you.
The time is now, but if I stood bare before you
you would not tell me my thighs held those craters
moon skin so soft, you could burst right through.
Spare me.
In every instant I have thought
I love you just now, you've been silent—
no explanation for staying with me.
Just staying.

I will be twenty-seven, walking among the mangroves
and the idea of you will hit me like an anchor.
I will be orange groves in the Keys
you the love I had forgotten
or something I never knew was real
and I will spend the next three weeks searching through the yellow pages
for every county in Kentucky
forgetting everything planned—
work calls, scrubbing the half-bath
a husband up north fighting for a cause.
Ken-tah-ten, you are my land of tomorrow
today is over, tomorrow ends,
and I will never find where you went.

August 22nd, 5 A.M.

A giant waste.
I do nothing to build something good
smooth of the satin on my cheek
rouge of my cheek in the snow
rouge of the wine that stains the children in the sand, my hand,
it's gray, it's
missing like my first nightmares
where hands flew through the air
smashed my neck, pressed my mouth shut.
Just like that, an African woman tied to a date palm in the river basin
a child trained to kill
a fly on the window.
I think insomnia is uncomfortable
in a hundred dollars of blankets.
The moon shines like a skylight.
I roll to my side
while a thousand children
fight through concrete bodies to breathe.

The Reason for China

A blinding Saturday, late afternoon
after driving an hour with the ceramic plates,
you opened the door to watch them slide out one by one
and shatter on the asphalt—
I could feel the adrenaline numbing my ten-year-old limbs
as I winced and waited for rage to bubble up
and spill from your mouth into the air.

You screamed at spilt salad, hiding in the produce aisle, a dirty bathroom, a packing day
my lack of understanding for numbers
the wall hitting your elbow, and you'd punch it right back
and when I was so sure this time was like all the rest—
when I stepped out of my body and away from that truck—
you laughed
Not the kind before screams.

Sucked back into the back seat, I felt it all start to rise
I laughed past the point of calm, past pain,
blood clotted in my throat, face flushed, tears back inside my skull
a pomegranate's beads
it blew like suds, it felt so sick, and I laughed along
because that's all I could do.

Cassie Falk

Childish Mind

At age four, I convinced myself that I was Minnie Mouse. On the first trip to Disney World that I can remember, my parents bought me a Minnie Mouse dress when they bought my sister a Tinker Bell one. I put up a fight to get it.

"If I get you this, will you wear it?" my mother asked.

I nodded my head vigorously, saying, "Yes ma'am."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes ma'am."

My family was under strain; my father was opening his independent office, and that was where most of our money was going. I didn't know how consuming this was. I just knew I wanted the dress. My sister made a similar promise and my parents bought both of them.

My parents commissioned painted portraits of each of their daughters. The only one I ever remember being done was mine. I've seen it maybe two times in my life, right after it was painted. The artist, one of my father's patients named Maggie, came to my house with her camera one afternoon. My mother had me up at six-thirty, going through my dresses to try to figure out what I was going to wear.

"It's Minnie day." I picked up the dress and started to slip it off of the hanger. My mother stopped me.

"It's old though."

"Not really."

"Yes it is."

"Then what do you want me to wear?" I asked, sitting on the carpet. I folded my arms over my chest and watched as my mother flicked back to the Friday night services dresses that I loathed openly. All of them were hand-me-downs from at least one of my sisters. I didn't like having their castoffs—they got new things without grape juice stains and holes. My dresses were covered with huge, brilliantly colored flowers that made me feel like a fruit bowl. At my sigh, my mother glanced back at me before continuing to flick through the dresses.

We sat in silence aside from the hangers scraping over the metal bar. She pulled down a few dresses and laid them on the bed on top of my everyday dresses, spreading out the full skirts. I don't remember making a face, but my mother's expression made me blank away my own. Finally, she scooped up the Minnie Mouse dress and the one Friday night dress I would wear willingly when I had to dress up. I scrambled up and followed her out into the family room.

My father sat, tying his tie and trying to clean up his office work—discerning what he needed to take and what he needed to leave. He didn't look up at us as my mother rustled the dresses, so she proceeded to clear her throat.

He looked up.

"You know, I don't think that either of those will fit you," my father said.

"Very cute. Which one should she wear?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"You're not very helpful."

"This is supposed to be a natural portrait, not something stiff and posed. Why would you have her wear a fancy dress doing something like playing outside?"

My mother didn't answer, but held out the Minnie Mouse dress to me. I took it, hugging it to myself as I ran to my bedroom. She came in a few minutes later to button up the back of my dress. I looked at her in the mirror and smiled. When she saw the smile, she turned me around and hugged me.

When the painter showed up, I was in the dress, but my mother insisted that I didn't wear the matching ears. My mother sat in the house while Maggie had me lead her around my house and yard, doing small everyday activities, like swinging on the swing set or sitting in a rocking chair on my front porch. She took photos the entire time.

Maggie came to our house again with the prints of each photo. My parents chose one for the portrait to be painted from. They planned to hang it in our living room.

The portrait stayed at my house for what seemed like less than a week. After running rampant all day, my mother led me into the living room where the portrait leaned against the piano bench. I stared at it, quiet for once.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Maggie finished it yesterday and brought it this morning."

"Oh," I said. I looked down at the dress I was wearing, the Minnie Mouse dress. The scarlet of the skirt had begun to fade. Maggie had added the brilliance my costume lacked. I smiled at the portrait, half expecting it to smile back at me. When it didn't, I shrugged at my mother. She didn't say anything, but she allowed me to go and sit on the couch until supper.

When my father came home, they both looked at the portrait for a few minutes before we all sat down to dinner. My father asked a few questions of me that evening. Did I like the painting. Had I really been frowning in the print or was it over-emphasized—he couldn't remember. I gave fast answers, leaning over my chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese. I didn't mean to be defensive, it came naturally to me to be that way and led often to arguments until I learned to be guarded.

The portrait disappeared after a week. It took me a long time to realize that the painting was gone, at least a few weeks. From the way that my parents had spoken about it, quietly with each other, with just a few questions from me, I assumed it would come back. I don't know if they ever got the prints from Maggie. When I finally ventured to ask my mother about it, why it hadn't been hung up yet, she said that Maggie had it. That was the end of the conversation.

I forgot about the portrait for a long time. When it didn't resurface, I didn't notice and my parents didn't mention it to me. Lexi'd had her photos taken, but Maggie never came by with the prints. I imagine that my sisters remembered their portraits, and asked my parents about them.

To this day, my sisters complain that I got to do everything a little bit earlier than they did. The very fact that I was the first to get my portrait done, followed by the fact that Maggie never showed up again set up this constant rivalry between the three of us, at least between Lexi and I. Lexi had been the baby before me, had gotten the most attention. Now that I was around, and she was in school, while I still wasn't, I was around my mother more—something she wanted.

When I started going to school, my mother tried to ease me out of wearing the Minnie Mouse dress quite as much. Honestly, I can't remember being allowed to wear the dress to school on any occasion other than Story Book Dress-Up Day. Many tears were shed on my bedroom floor as I insisted that it was Minnie day.

My mother would argue, "It's old."

"No, it's not," I said. I clenched my fingers around the worn fabric of the skirt, trying to hold onto it so she couldn't take it away.

She'd jerk it out of my grasp. "Wear one of your other dresses, because you're not wearing this one."

As she left the room, I'd cry, and refuse to get up from the floor. Five minutes before my sisters were ready to leave for school, she'd come back in, pull a dress down from a hanger and toss it onto the bed. "Wear that one," she said. I would, knowing that if I didn't get dressed, my father would spank me when he got home that night.

Always, the dress was in my closet when I got home. My mother couldn't understand my attachment to the dress, but knew that she would never hear the end of it if I didn't get the dress back. Our arguments about the dress didn't dissipate until I was out of primary school. When I stopped mentioning wearing the dress, and failed to wear it on the weekends, it was pushed to the back of my closet and almost forgotten.

We said little about the portraits for a number of years, but working in my father's office, helping Allison with the insurance work that I knew very little of, but apparently, as I knew my ABCs, would be adequate to pull billing cards from their filing system, I found a name with a debt far more than I could imagine. I brought it into Allison's office where my father and she were arguing about billing a pet patient. I put the card on her desk and tried to leave without disturbing the argument.

My father glanced down at the card and held it up, saying "This is who you should be targeting. Her bill should have gone to collections two or so

years ago." He tossed the card back onto her desk, and turned as if to leave. Seeing me still half in the doorway, he picked it back up and held it up to my eyes, his finger underlining the name over an over. "This is your Maggie."

I stared at him, trying not to laugh at his hysterics. He knew that he could yell at me more than his other staff. I was his daughter; I was obligated to help in his office. It was a family business. I didn't have the option of quitting, and he knew that. This also meant that he couldn't fire me, so I could laugh at his temper tantrums when the rest of his staff couldn't. His face had turned red and he resembled the screaming banshee he had called me often as a child. Seeing my lips straining to keep from smiling, my father calmed himself down. "This is the woman who painted your portrait when you were little."

I don't know if the debt was ever sent to collections or ever paid and never asked my father about it. I assumed for a long time that perhaps my sisters' and my portraits were supposed to be done in exchange for the debt to my father. When they weren't completed, I assumed this was why my father was so angry.

My father said he prided himself on helping people who couldn't help themselves. As a chiropractor, he took away other people's pain. When I was younger, as far as I understood, people paid as they came; the concepts of credit or deferred payment were over my head, as was insurance. When I grew older, I understood it better. In understanding this, I thought perhaps my father had failed to pay Maggie for the portrait; this would have made sense of my suspicion that he didn't like the portraits.

I was wrong. My father prepaid Maggie for the portraits, assuming that they would be done in full faith. When mine was done quickly, my parents were excited and had the prints done quickly for my sister's.

Maggie stopped the process of my sister's portrait, my father says, in order to prepare for an art show. This was the show my portrait appeared in. I think that my parents went to see it. My mother tells me that my father was supposed to drive to Maggie's studio to get the portrait and didn't. Maggie wouldn't bring it to the office, as until her bill was paid, my father wouldn't treat her.

It was funny to think about. If my father hadn't paid Maggie for the portraits, she could have taken them back—she did that anyway. My father cannot take the care back from his patients—this was something that I didn't necessarily understand when I was younger—but had my father tried to take his care back, he would have had to try to move the bones back into the wrong places. He would have been sued for malpractice and had his license revoked.

It's funny to think that my portrait is being held hostage. I felt, looking at the portrait when I was younger, that I was being held hostage in it, unable to grow up and be like my sisters, who seemed to be able to do things I couldn't yet fathom.

I didn't care about the portrait until recently. The fact that I can't see this

preservation of my childhood self bothers me now. All of the photos I have found of my childhood, I have a smile, because my parents had instructed me to smile. The real image of myself as I truly was sits in Maggie's studio.

Being older, my father must have seen something in the portrait that showed how captured I felt. He nicknamed me the wretch as a child, because in every photo or in every situation, I would find the worst thing and would focus on it, ensuring that I looked altogether miserable under the happiest of circumstances. It only took thirteen years for me to figure out this was why my father stared at the portrait for so long. It was also the reason that he asked me so frankly about the portrait.

My child's mind let me convince myself that my father didn't like the portrait, though I know now that this wasn't true. I'd been offended a little, unsure of why he couldn't like it as it was. I didn't mention it to him, figuring that he wanted me to look as happy as he wanted his children to be. I know that in all actuality, I was a very happy child, I just never smiled. Even now I still don't and on days that I look especially melancholy, the old nickname arises.

I've wondered a few times if maybe she'd sold the portrait. When we've seen Maggie in passing, she's always pulled me into a group to exclaim, "this is the girl in the red polka dotted dress in the portrait in my studio." The people always talk about how much I've grown up. Usually, I'm asked to scowl.

It frustrated me for a few years that I couldn't have the portrait. What was more frustrating was that my parents didn't fight to get it back.

I held onto the Minnie Mouse dress for as long as I could still wear it. I continued to wear it consistently every few days, giving it time to be washed and dried before I ran rampant in it again. My mother to this day says it was one of the best investments she made during my childhood. By the time I gave it up, I could barely discern the once scarlet skirt from the white polka-dots. I was certain that my mother had thrown the dress away, because it was falling apart. Asking her where it was one afternoon, she pulled aside the old Halloween costumes in my closet to show the pale dress that seemed way too small to have ever fit me.

My parents spoke of this stage of my life as a joke for a while, but we tended to only talk about it during the holidays with my mother's family. So when I asked my dad for help in buying a costume last year for Halloween, he called, saying he'd found the costume I'd wanted, but they also had a Minnie Mouse costume that exactly matched the dress from my childhood. I'd quietly said that I wanted them both and that he should choose for me. When I got home for an extended weekend, the Minnie Mouse dress greeted me like a friend long lost. I tried it on, and came out into my family room. My mother started laughing, and my father said quietly, "Show me the old wretch."

Megan Hicks

Calling the Moon

The road was long and crooked, but I knew the hum of the old gravel under the tires and I knew the rhythm of the cracks in the street. I kept my eyes open out of habit, and I watched my dad and my brother in the silver Ford F-250 and black trailer in front of my mother and I, who were in a beige Oldsmobile van loaded with clothes and junk food. The radio was on and turned to 104.7 WNOK, Columbia's Top Pop station, and I pushing the limits of FM radio waves as far as I possibly could, milking it for all it was worth.

It was the afternoon of Christmas day, and I was eleven years old. The sky was blanketed in grey, like dusty polyester on the inside of a pillow, and scattered in between the towering pines were skeleton trees, making angular shapes out of pockets of sky on the horizon. It was the perfect day for traveling the speed limit with the heat blasting in your face—you could witness the beauty of the cold without experiencing it, somehow see some small facet of pretty that you couldn't see if you were a part of the chill.

We were going to the hunting club my dad's family had frequented since before he was my age. I had been making the hour and a half trip from my hometown of Pelion, South Carolina to Cottageville, South Carolina every other weekend and major holidays during white tail season since infancy. It had become tradition to go down to Cottageville every Christmas and stay in our little cabin until New Year's day.

I wasn't a social passenger then. I mostly sat quietly during the drive down to Cottageville and listened to whatever came onto the radio. My mother never complained—she said it was like no one was in the car with her at all. I imagine we were both off in our separate worlds, tucking bits and pieces of it away, much in the same way you have to make sure the dog has food and you've locked all the doors before you can leave your home.

Cottageville, South Carolina is almost exactly the midpoint between Walterboro and Summerville. To get to Sandhill Hunting Club, you have to turn off of the main highway onto a seven mile red clay road leading into the tall pine forest that covers much of the state. Eventually, there is a five acre clearing on the right side of the road we call Camp; it contains a scattering of small cabins, campers, a skinning shed, and a long building that shelters a cooking shed with a wooden table with high benches and a metal top where we gathered for lunch.

I got out of the van and walked over to the dog pens, where Dad was backing up the truck to the gate. When the truck stopped I walked over and let down the tail gate, and was immediately greeted with woofs and howls and long, whip-like tails colliding into the side of the dog box. I waited until my Dad walked around and opened the gate before I unlocked the latches to the gates and they fought to be the first one out. I led them out onto the tailgate,

double checked that there were magnets in place in the tracking collars, and helped them down from the tail gate to the ground and into the pen.

It was my favorite chore to do—there is something infectious in the happiness of a pack of hounds, and I seemed to breathe it all in as I scratched their heads and talked to them. I say talked to them, because you don't coo and baby talk at hunting dogs. There's something about a hound with a lean, powerful body and smart eyes that returns to you because it wants to, not because it couldn't live without you, that demands the respect of real, adult words rather than the half-formed slurred words you'd use with a house pet.

As I remember, the pack consisted of nine dogs. My two favorites of the pack were Black Gal, a black-and-tan dog on the smaller side that was notorious for always finding her way back to Camp, and Mario, brother to Luigi and Genie, who wagged his tail so hard when I walked up to the pen to pet him that his rump physically moved several inches back and forth like a pendulum.

My mother and Black Gal have a history. Once, back at home, before I can even remember, Mom told me that she'd caught Black Gal outside of the fence, and she'd put her back in and made sure the latch to the gate worked. The second time or third time that Mom caught her outside of the fence, she decided to put her on a leash inside of the fence until Dad got home from work and could reinforce some of the wire. This was turning out to be a big issue; we live off a major highway, and if a dog isn't used to traffic, it's a deadly place.

Black Gal chewed her way through the leash and slipped out the yard again. After that, Mom says that we searched the road, slow enough to call her name and scan the horizon. It wasn't until three days later that my mom saw Black Gal again, standing at the kitchen window washing dishes. Mom says that when she heard the other dogs start to howl and bark, she looked up to see if anyone was in the driveway. Black Gal was trotting over the barren field in front of our house, making a beeline for the dog pens with a trail of puppies behind her. Mom says that she ran out the door almost crying and carried the pups to the pen herself, praising that momma dog the whole way.

When we finished the dog chores—putting them in the pen, drawing water from the pump, feeding them and making sure none of them fought over food—then we'd settle in ourselves. We made the beds and put away the food, turned on the generator, and in the winter months, we had a kerosene heater that we placed in the very middle of the small room.

I wasn't a hunter, so there were times at Sandhill that were stained with boredom. The only person there around my age was Rodman, who was in fact a year older than me and, in his own little ways, made sure that I remembered the difference the whole time I was around him. He came to Sandhill a lot less often than I did, but when he did manage to come down, we suffered through the non-hunter boredom together.

Sometimes we would walk around Camp, listening to the sounds of insects and squirrels and talk about the books we had read and the music that we liked. Sometimes we'd just sit in the cabin and watch cartoons from the little seventeen inch T.V. that we had, and sometimes Mom would walk with us up the dirt road to Lownd's Landing, a small camping area with a boat ramp leading into the Edisto River.

The last time we talked, we were sitting on the front porch. We were waiting for something to happen, anything to happen. I looked up at him and studied his face—the Cherokee in him made him beautiful. He had bronze skin, dark hair, and eyes that looked like dark, wet wood, and always complimented his good looks with brand name clothing and hair gel. On the whole, he was a handsome guy, though this only impressed me once in a while, when I saw the sunlight slant over his face or noticed how the years had changed him.

"I'm moving in with my dad," he said. "I probably won't be down here anymore."

"With your dad?" I said. "With his girlfriend and her kids, too? Are you sure that's the best thing?"

"I'll get what I want out of it," he said. "I'll have more freedom than I do living with Papa."

"I guess that's a good point," I said. "I don't know how you'd deal with the kids, though. I don't think I'd be able to."

"You haven't lived with Ryan all your life," Rodman said.

"No, I've lived with Mikey all my life," I said. "My little brother causes just as much trouble as yours."

"Somehow I doubt that," he said.

"I don't," I said. "But anyways. I'm probably not going to be down a lot either."

"Why?" he asked.

"I got accepted into this school, and I have to live there."

"What?" He said. "Where?"

I stared at the ground beyond the porch, to the mosaic of leaf litter and black dirt that surrounded us.

"Governor's school. Greenville," I said, trying not to brag.

"Oh. Oh," he said. "I got accepted there too."

"What? Really? What for?"

"Creative writing."

"Well, why didn't you go?"

"I was going to," he said. "But then I realized that I'd be leaving all of my friends. I decided to stay in Lexington."

I didn't realize for a long time that he'd been lying, and that he had probably never even heard of the school before. Then I wondered *Why would he tell me something like that? Was it some kind of last stand to impress me? To make him-*

self feel better? To somehow fight the loneliness that was going to occur in his father's household? A couple of years later, in my dorm room on the fourth floor in the middle of Greenville, I wished we were back in the middle of the woods so that I could ask him and the whole world not be close enough to hear the answer.

My older brother, Billy, his wife Angie, and their daughters came down to Sandhill a few weekends out of the year. When Kenzie, the youngest of the two daughters, was about three, the whole family was there, sitting on the porch. Kenzie was on my lap, and from time to time I bounced my leg to hear her laugh and cling to my jacket in play-terror.

"Full moon tonight," Billy said, looking up at the sky. He was standing next to the grill, his hands in his camouflage pockets.

"Yep," Dad said. "Won't need a flashlight tonight." The moon lit up the ground in pale, white light. I have always thought that it was the perfect moonlight to dance in.

"Watch this," Billy said, and grinned at Kenzie, his white teeth showing. "Kenzie," he said. "Call the moon, Kenzie."

She grinned and straightened herself in my lap, found the moon in the sky, and pressed her small, pink lips in to a circle and called, as loud as she could, "Whoo-oop. Whoo-oo-oop!"

For a minute, we all joined in with her, encouraging. I loved the feeling of unison and the sensation of something small and secret within me, within all of us, call out to something more ancient than we. We laughed afterwards, trying to cover up how silly we were, but I will always love the feeling of calling the moon.

It was night, the weekend of the thanksgiving after I turned seventeen. Dad had hunted and ran the pack of dogs that day, and he was tracking dogs so that they wouldn't have to sleep in the woods. Mom and Mikey were sitting in the cab of the truck, with the heater. I was sitting on the dog box and my hair was flying behind me as Dad guided the silver truck down the dirt roads. The cold pressed against me, but I didn't care. The stars were clear and bright, like pinpoints of sugar against the sky. I picked out constellations, starting with the North Star. Big Dipper, Little Dipper, what I thought might be Draco and maybe Orion. I watched the moon swivel around us as we changed directions. Dad would stop every mile or so to consult the tracker as to where the dogs were. We were getting close. Dad stopped the truck and cut the ignition. Almost immediately, in the sudden absence of the diesel engine rumble, I could hear the hounds baying in the distance.

There were two of them. After listening for a minute, I recognized one of them to be Dusty, a female Walker we had gotten the previous year. When she ran, she cried out with a long, deep howls that sounded like a canine version of a war chant. Dad listened with the window down for a moment, then stepped

out of the truck and turned on the tracker for a second, just to verify the numbers, then cut it off.

"Dusty's running," he said, and we were all quiet, listening. Dad let out a whistle, followed by her name in a Vulcan-esque bellow. For a moment, all we could hear was the other dog, and then Dusty was back, her primitive voice bursting from the darkness. As fast as a dog could run, the baying got louder. Dad whistled and let out a *Whoo-ooo-oop, Dusty!* And Dusty called back, the same bark over and over, as if to say *Wait, wait, wait, I can't believe you're finally here.*

The cold hit late the year I turned eighteen. November came and went without much of a chill. It wasn't until the very beginning of December that I could smell ice and cold on the wind and the leaves fell from the half-bare branches of trees to huddle on the ground. I was walking in downtown Greenville, South Carolina, the city that the arts school resided in. Emily, my roommate, was beside me, and the sun was in the process of setting.

"I sort of miss the country," I said. "I mean, it doesn't even get dark at night, here."

"It's like that in every city," Emily said, as if it were the most common thing in the world.

"I know," I said. "But you can actually see the stars back home. In Cottageville, in the middle of no where, you don't even need a light most nights, the moon is so bright."

Emily nodded, but I could see that the conversation was going no where, so I dropped it. Emily was originally from Long Island, New York, and I was from Pelion, South Carolina, and there were small glories about both locations that were exclusive to native residents. I think that we both missed our places of origin, for different views on the same reasons.

There were dogs on the street. Dogs that had their nails trimmed, dogs with weak, superficial barks and whining noises that grated my nerves. Dogs that growled and made noise for no reason were scattered everywhere. There were some days where I'd see the untouchable dignity of a leashed German Shepard with the horribly slanted back that was somehow beautiful and the happy couple walking with a pair of pure bred poodles chattering at their heels. It was days like those that I wished I could shut up all of the city's dogs, wrap muzzles around their snouts until they had something to bark at.

We sat on one of the swinging benches in Fall's Park. We didn't talk—one thing that was great about Emily and me was that we didn't have to talk to be at peace—and we just looked at the world and soaked all of it in. The trees moved with the breeze and our reflections stared back at us out of the black water. The cold settled like a ghost inside of my jacket, and I inhaled, wishing I were smelling something cleaner than the Reedy River. A dark shape passed overhead. Emily and I watched.

"Was that a bat?" Emily said.

"No, it was probably just a late bird," I said. "The shape of it was wrong, and it was too big to be a bat."

"I guess so," Emily said. "We have a bat house at our home. The one in South Carolina," she said. "Sometimes you can see them come and go."

"That's awesome. I think they must live in the trees or something at home." I said. "During the summer, if you're in the pool at night and you're really still, they'll swoop down and drink the water, just a couple of feet away from you."

"That's cool," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "It is. But there aren't big bats there. The only big ones I've seen are further south, like down where the hunting club is. There isn't enough room to be big up here."

Hannah Jarrett

Burying Jerry

My father cried on his thirty-sixth birthday. He was cutting the grass. The tears came just after my mother told him the news. "Jerry Garcia is dead," she said from the back deck.

He rode the lawn mower over the same section of grass again and again, his hand leaving the steering wheel to wipe his eyes. He didn't ask questions when he came in the house. But my mother walked up to him, touched his arm, murmuring about heroin and heart attacks.

My parents had already ordered tickets for the next Grateful Dead tour stop. Three shows at the Boston Garden on September thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth. My mother still calls it the "show that never was." Only a thousand tickets were sold when Jerry died. Four were mailed to my house with a eulogy, the backs of the tickets stamped with a smudge that was supposed to be Jerry's face.

There was a process to ordering Grateful Dead tickets through the mail. First, my mother sent a self-addressed envelope to 710 Ashbury Street. A few weeks later, the tickets were sent back in the envelope. Some Dead Heads would sequin their self-addressed envelopes, draw Stealys and Grateful Bears, write lyrics in swirled letters, paste pictures, using more color than five-year old finger painters. But my parents had named my sister after the Grateful Dead song, "Cassidy," so they just scribbled her name in black ink above the California address, sticking a blue and white stamp in the corner. They were too old to care about the visual appeal of an envelope.

I always thought the Boston Gardens tickets were somewhere in my father's room, wedged between frames of the pictures he took of The Grateful Dead. He had bought an expensive camera with multiple lenses and enough zoom power to make faraway faces clear and distinguishable. There are pictures of my mother, her short hair the color of her freckles, looking annoyed because my father made her stop dancing so he could burn the moment into film. His bedroom walls map out a photographic history of the band. Jerry Garcia playing his guitar, Phil Lesh with his bass, Bob Weir singing into a mic, blue and purple lights tinting their faces. Jerry doesn't seem to age in these pictures even though they span a time of fifteen years. He looks just past sixty even though he was barely fifty-three when he died. The blown up picture above the bed was taken at a show in Miami in 1993. That's the year my sister was born. Maybe they were playing "Cassidy," my mother eight months pregnant with no shoes on.

Music is always playing in my parents' bedroom. Lately, it's been the '95 Dead shows. My father has been burning every Grateful Dead show onto CD in order for the past six years. He's almost done. Less than a year of shows to go. I asked him once why he needed every show; the Grateful Dead only had so many songs.

"These aren't for listening to on car trips, sweetie, these are an archive," he said.

In this way, my father has become a curator. His bedroom, the museum. The History of the Grateful Dead, it would be called. Featuring Jerry Garcia. A painted portrait of Jerry dominates the wall opposite the door. His frizzed gray hair, round glasses, slight smile, and black t-shirt makes him look like he should be nailed in the White House among centuries of presidents. Leaning in the window sill is a bumper sticker that says "Who is the Grateful Dead and why are they following me?" Across from the bed is an armoire with a Cat Under the Stars tapestry thumb-tacked over the built in mirror. My mother didn't like looking at herself when she was sitting in bed.

The bookshelf by the closet door is organized by category. Biographies of Jerry Garcia, the history of the Grateful Dead and their loyal followers, volumes of lyrics. And more about LSD and heroin than my mother would like me to know. The most referenced of these books is a heavy black hardcover with a psychedelic green design on the front. *Deadbase Volume 10*, a catalog of every Grateful Dead set list played in their thirty years. And if there's ever a question about terminology, my father will point out the thick paperback called *Skeleton Key: A Dictionary for Dead Heads*. On top of the bookshelf is a set of stuffed Grateful Bears, the tags around their necks turned so the names are visible. Names like Cassidy and Althea and Sunshine and Stella Blue.

Just as much is hidden as is on display. Under the bed sit cardboard boxes of bootlegged tapes. If there was ever a fire, my father would die trying to get those boxes out of the house. Grateful Dead t-shirts for every occasion spill out of the dresser drawers. Halloween, Christmas, St. Patrick's Day, Valentine's Day, Fourth of July. Shoeboxes full of pictures that won't fit on the walls line the top shelf of the closet. Every time we clean out the dressers and closets, we find more memorabilia than my father knows how to explain. But nothing, except for a couple of books written after 1995, suggests Jerry's death.

My father buried Jerry Garcia in the bottom drawer of the old oak wash stand in our dining room. In a sandwich bag under corroded AA batteries, cheap flashlights, broken headphones, and frayed extension cords. Somewhere in that sandwich bag, among fifteen years of unorganized ticket stubs, is a creased envelope with my sister's name on it and the address of a house we no longer live in.

Boy

after Naomi Shihab Nye

Again, "done" is for the bread.
Let's finish our sentences like humans.
When you talk in circles
I imagine your hair without a face.
Raw vegetables prickle like wool against my throat.
Somewhere, girls are deciding what to wear
for all of next week. I've got this suspicion
tomorrow is going to show me what I need.
When you say the word "forever"
all the vowels seem to up and hop on a plane.
I've got these metaphors in my head.
They're coming out when I laugh.
Listen: in my past there's a house of walls
I've sworn to write on before I die.
Nearby, a room I've built in the curve
of your hipbones. If only you could find my way home.
Half of me cares for half of you
and the money in my pocket's for betting.
Would it scare you if I told you orange
is yellow when no one has said it like that before?

My Last Poem

after Franz Wright

1.
Was his pocket full of weeds, folded bills, a year's worth of lists?

Last winter
we thought about the responsibilities of a stop sign.

By the time I landed my car in the field
beside his house, we had forgotten
how to look both ways
twice before crossing
into each other's living rooms, how
to look at each other the way people do
when they have something real
sitting in front of them.

Now, he's flying
over a continent.

Hands in empty
pockets.

2.
And on which road was it, Sid Bickley or Kennerly, he drove
on the wrong side of the line and I wanted to press
my palm into his chest,
suck the adventure out of him,
in the way of mothers?

3.
When I walk across the city,
I find myself waiting at street corners
for him
to catch up.

Walking across the city, sometimes,
I'm overwhelmed with love for strangers
who don't know he's behind me.
Like the time his mother didn't see us

slink by her window the night we stayed out late

trying to fill the space between us with an ocean

but still stay close enough to catch one another's breath.

Call me next time
you're walking across the city.

4.
I didn't mean to laugh
the night fear turned the headlights off
after we counted
five cop cars
in a row.
Spent minutes looking
for the road
and our clothes,
wiping holes in the fog on window.

I want him to know that.

5.
It's July again, and we're running
through the Ballentine rain
with our hands
in our pockets.
Side by side, calling each other something
other than our names,
we're running and we don't know
where we're going and that's why we're running
and we've already missed the sun but it's okay
because we're together and we're running
toward the same thing.

Jessica Jernigan

Journey-work

After twenty-three years, my grandmother was revitalized. You would have thought that the floods that washed through the streets of Springdale every couple of years had kept her from every happiness since she'd moved into her little ranch-style house by the river after my grandfather died. The third year the April rains didn't wash everything away, she changed completely. She lived a hundred yards from the river, her house perched on a hill just high enough that her baseboards stayed bone-dry, but the lawn turned swamp every time the river rose. We didn't want to remind her that the next year might not be the same, that water might swallow everything just like it had before. She assured us that when things changed in a town like Springdale, they changed for good. She was sure it would last forever.

Since I was little, I spent a week each year with Grandma Belle, usually at the end of July. When Grandma Belle called to see—a little insistently—if I could find the time to come right when school let out, we assumed it was part of her rejuvenation due to the inactivity of the water levels. I didn't have room to protest. My mother reminded me that if I didn't go to Grandma Belle's house, she would come to us, and then we might never get rid of her.

I turned fourteen that summer, still not old enough to drive myself to Springdale. My mother drove me down to the BP at the Newberry exit halfway between our house and my grandmother's, where Grandma Belle would pick me up in her claret Cadillac. Mom and I leaned against the bumper with ice cream cones hand-dipped by the Wiccan girl who worked in the gas station. We bought the ice cream out of tradition rather than because it was actually good—it tasted funny and the cones were sort of chewy.

"It's weird, Anna," my mom said to me. "You know that Belle doesn't ask for any of your cousins to come see her. Not even Emma."

"She does the beauty pageants, right? And dances?" I half-listened, trying to decide if the ribbon of dark that hung just along the horizon was a line of storm clouds.

"She clogs. You're a little old to still be doing this. It's weird. She's always liked you a little more than the rest. Even during your tomboy years."

A trickle of Rocky Road slid down my knuckles and dropped a marshmallow on my shoe. "I was cute then."

"We had a hard time getting you to bathe."

Just then, my grandmother's car appeared on the onramp. I could see her knuckles on either side of the steering wheel and her hair newly permed so that it gave her silhouette a trapezoidal shape. I watched my mother throw her cone away and go to pop the trunk. It was now time for her to help me with my bags and say as little to my grandmother as possible. Grandma Belle was my father's mother. After seventeen years of being mother- and daughter-in-law, they still didn't know how to treat each other—especially since my parents' separation.

My grandmother lived alone in a house that smelled of after-dinner mints and carpet cleaner. It was tastelessly pink with floral upholstery and catalogue furniture, with an imitation Hummel figurine or one of my cousin's graduation headshots for every end table. Every year on the drive to Springdale I imagined that the house might have changed in some way—a porcelain replica of Michelangelo's David in the corner, a new wing with a recording studio, maybe some African ceremonial masks instead of the variety of egrets carved out of pockmarked pieces of driftwood along the bookshelf.

I was arranging a beanbag living room set in my mind when Grandma Belle said, "Annie—I've got a big surprise for you," as we pulled onto the interstate. The excitement in her eyes was magnified by the thick lenses of her bifocals. "You'll never guess."

"What is it?" I asked her.

"Guess." She clapped both hands on the steering wheel causing us to swerve a little.

"I really don't know, Grandma."

She sat up a little straighter and turned her eyes back to the road. Even with the boost in posture, she was still peering just barely over the steering wheel. "I've been working on a project for a few years. Since your father was a little boy." She looked at me with narrowed eyes. "I've kept it a secret."

I had a habit of watching the road when the driver of a car I was in didn't, as though it might help. We were straying a little too close to the guardrail.

"It was my mother who started it. She passed it on to me." She turned her eyes on the road, but took her right hand off the steering wheel and laid it on mine. It was dry and cold to the touch, her rings pressing into my knuckles. "I want you to help me with my scrapbooks."

I forced a smile and let her keep talking about it, how she hadn't been trusted with any of the furniture or heirlooms from her mother's house, just all the bits and pieces of our family members' lives. There were whole boxes devoted to single weddings, photographs and newspaper clippings all sorted and tucked away between sheets of tissue paper—her life's work catalogued in shoeboxes and milk crates at the bottoms of all the closets in her house. As she spoke, I could see the week before me stretch into eternity.

I went to bed early that night—something I did at my grandmother's to make the days seem shorter. My sleep was fitful. I kept imagining I heard footsteps in the night, low whispers in the hallway. I woke up the next morning to the smell of pancakes sizzling in lard and the sound of a light rain.

I walked into the breakfast room still in my pajamas. Grandma Belle had set a plate of about thirty pancakes on the table next to a carton of milk and one of orange juice. I picked up the newspaper and started to look for the comics. She walked in with a little plastic pill organizer marked with the days of the

week. I waited for her to ask me what I wanted to do that day, like she always did when I came to stay, as I helped myself to a small stack of pancakes. She had already made plans.

"First I want to show you what we've got—there are lots of boxes of things I've been sorting for a while. Next we need to go to the craft store to get some albums. I'm going to need more of those. If you want, we can eat in town. Libby's Diner just opened back up since that rat fiasco. After that, we can do what you like. Tomorrow, I think we should go buy some seeds for planting. I've been thinking about putting out a little flowerbed now that that river is going to stay down." Between each item, she took a pill with a swallow of juice, ending with two small blue ones.

"Full day," I said. I reminded myself that staying active would make the days go by faster.

"Lots to do," she said. "Have some more pancakes."

After breakfast, we started looking at photographs. We started with the most recent ones. They were in the bottom of the closet at the back of the house below the linens. She handed me a shoebox of sonograms taken a few weeks earlier of my cousin's twins and pictures of the new puppy my uncle had just bought. I set them down without looking through them as she handed me more. We worked back through the '90s and the '80s; shots of my mother, tan in swimsuits, her hair monstrously teased; my father's garage band and his red Trans Am; my aunt's wedding, my uncle's. Grandma Belle talked as we went, boxing up each stack of photos and pulling out another. We had to move to the next closet when we finished with those. That took us into the '60s when my father was a baby, long before he met my mother. My aunt Charlotte and uncle George were tan and long-legged, their hair bleached blonde by the sun, nine and eleven years older than my father.

"Your father surprised us. He came around just after we moved to Charleston. That's why we named him Charles, you know. George for Georgia, Charlotte for Charlotte. We moved a lot for your granddaddy's work. We were happy to move by the beach, but we didn't expect your daddy..." She went on as I focused on the pictures of my father, trying to find some resemblance between us. It was hard—his hair changed often and he was skinny for most of his life. In that, I saw little similarities between us. I imagined that we might have the same smile or that our hands might move the same way in a game of cards, but I couldn't make that out in the photographs. I watched him get younger and younger until he disappeared altogether. The landscape changed and the pictures held only Charlotte and George. "Look at these," Grandma told me, and handed me three different pictures of the same body of water. The water was dark, but a different hue in each. Blue, then green, then red. "I took these when we lived in Aiken."

"Are these from different cameras?" I asked her.

"Nope. Those are all of Langley Pond. The pond used to change color

depending on what dye they used in the textile plant. Neat, isn't it?"

She kept handing me photographs until the box seemed empty. Just before she closed it, though, she stopped sort and laid a hand on her collarbone. She took out a small leatherbound book tied shut with a piece of twine. The pages seemed barely held in place and were bursting with pressed flowers and leaves. On the spine, scratched in block letters, was the name Thomas Arthur Gray, Jr. That was my grandfather. Below that, there was the letter E. My grandmother ran her hands over the cover. They seemed weaker than before.

"I didn't think I'd find one of these," she said, quieter than before. "Your grandfather used to tell me to leave this scrapbooking business for later. He always wanted me to come walking with him. That's all he used to do. Walk and pick up little bits of where he was. I told him that he was doing just that—picking up scraps to remember."

I took the book from her, which was lighter than I thought. I untied the string and lifted the cover with one finger. There was a purple azalea pressed next to a picture of my grandmother, soft in its sepia tone, both glued down. In her face, I saw traces of my father—something in the lines that drew her cheekbones and her eyes. Above the flower and the photograph was a quote in rapid, slanting text. I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.

"What is that?" I asked her, trying not to touch the pages for fear of breaking them apart. "I think I've seen that somewhere."

"I don't know, Annie. Your grandfather was always reading something. Reading and walking and changing his ways."

I turned the page again and found a picture of the two of them. My grandmother looked small behind her horn-rimmed glasses, smaller with my grandfather's arm around her shoulders. He looked a lot like my father.

Before I could look further, Grandma Belle closed the journal and pulled it away. "That's enough of that. We've got lots more."

"That was really cool. Does he have any other ones?" I asked her as she pulled herself onto her feet by the doorknob and shut the closet.

"Somewhere, I'm sure. If they even made it to this house, they're up the attic somewhere. I never saw them. He never wanted me to keep them with the scrapbook things. He didn't like for me to read them, either." She hurried to the coat closet in the hallway.

When we finished with the photographs, Grandma Belle went to fix her hair so we could go into town. I showered and put on a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt and started to poke around the house. I wanted to find the rest of my grandfather's journals.

Rebekah Latour

White Seed

novella excerpt

One

The last time my father and I spoke was the eighth day of April, two years ago, when he drove that green Ford pickup truck with the Frigidaire chest freezer still in the bed, all the way up from South Carolina. He pulled into the driveway at nine in the morning, a sinking purple balloon tied to the passenger side-view mirror. I heard his brakes screech outside and was leaning against the open frame of the door before he could turn off the ignition. He was wearing his gray zip-up jacket. He always joked we didn't have spring in Connecticut. Standing in the doorway, I felt Emma pushing against the backs of my knees. I looked down to see the top of her dark hair, divided by the zigzag part I do for her on special occasions. I turned my legs to the side. Emma popped out like the cap from a squeezed soda bottle, and I watched her jump all three porch steps and run toward my father, who stood with his body bent and his mouth and arms open. "Six years old," he said. "Woo-wee!"

I had my husband Britt carry my father's suitcase up the stairs to the guest bedroom. My father protested. Still strong as a steer, he said. I slid a cold Sam Adams across the kitchen counter, and he cracked it open with his hands. For a moment the suck of breath from the bottle drowned out the suitcase wheels knocking up the steps. Emma sat at the table sipping a cherry cola through a green bendable straw. The only day of the year I let her drink soda before noon. My father set down his beer and slipped outside. He said he had a surprise for Emma waiting in his truck. She asked if it was a puppy, and he laughed and rubbed her hair. I smiled when Emma reached up to check if her part was still in place. My father every year until this point had brought Emma some sort of stuffed barnyard animal with beady black eyes, some that made their animal noise when you squeezed the stomach. I think after the pig, the cow, the chicken, the turkey, and last year the spotted horse, Emma was wondering what sort of new soft friend could possibly be out there for her. My father, instead, returned a few minutes later holding a vacuum packed bag with a colorful sticker on the front.

"Look-y what I've got," he said and dropped the bag on the table. Emma sat with her legs folded on top of her chair. She leaned forward and crinkled her nose. "What is it?" she said.

"Why, they're chicken fingers, all packed and ready to eat. With a little grease and batter, of course. Like a birthday dinner." My father crouched until he was looking Emma in the eye. "Not just any chicken fingers," he said. "The finest you can find in the whole state of South Carolina, brought to you from the fine delivery service of Banks Butchery. You're all grown up now. You can appreciate good meat. I can't have my granddaughter settle for some animal with stuffing for its insides."

Emma stared at the four cold strips squished together, tightened in their own plastic corset. She poked one of the middle pieces with her index finger. Britt looked at me from across the table.

"What?" my father said, straightening his legs again. "Chicken fingers. What kid doesn't like chicken fingers?"

"No, they're great. Just that Emma doesn't really eat meat," said Britt.

My father's eyes widened. He brought his right hand to his chest. Emma watched him, a sort of curiosity brightening across her cheeks.

"Thank you, Dad. That was very nice of you," I said. I stood up, lifting the pack of chicken strips from the table. Emma watched my hands. I walked into the kitchen and stuck the chicken in the freezer.

"She'll grow out of that." My father flicked his hand with a dismissive gesture and laughed. "Don't put them in the freezer. You don't want to freeze them already. Leave them out. Fry them up and see. I don't care how much she whines," my father said, waving his index finger like a teacher with a long wooden ruler, "once she tastes this meat she'll never touch a green bean again." I turned around and looked at Britt, who shrugged. I opened the freezer door and pulled them back out.

"There you are," my father said. "Good girl."

I set the pack on the counter.

"You know, Britt." My father leaned back in his chair. I could hear him sucking his tongue away from the roof of his mouth like he does when he's thinking. He said, "If it comes down to it, and Emma's as stubborn as her mother"—my father looked at me and winked—"you and Allison can enjoy a quality chicken dinner for yourselves. Allie's always had the soft spot for chicken fingers, isn't that right, baby?"

Britt's laugh burst out like a quick and hard cough. He leaned forward, and his eyebrows dipped like bowls above his eyes. I wondered out loud if anyone wanted another drink in an effort to steer the conversation. Emma, always one to help her mama out, wanted another cherry cola please.

"Allison won't eat that," Britt said.

"I got one right here, honey," I said, taking a soda can from the refrigerator. I had never before this day let Emma drink more than one soda at one time, and I haven't let her since.

"What do you mean?" my father said. "'Course she will."

"She hasn't touched a piece of meat in years, least not since I've known her."

Britt's voice was louder and more confident than my father's now, but I could feel both of their eyes bouncing off my forehead, competing for any sort of response. I watched my hands as they gripped the aluminum can, my thumb holding down the metal soda top, index finger hooked underneath. I popped the can open. A thin smoke of carbonation escaped and faded into the air. I could not shake off my father's gaze. I couldn't look at him. Britt looked back

and forth between the two of us, and I knew he could not understand. I have never told him much about my family. I told him my father sold meat. I told him my mother died in a house fire. I'm sure he has wondered before why I do not eat meat. I'm sure he's wondered a lot of things. But he has never asked questions, and I love him for this.

I walked to the table and set Emma's cola down a little harder than I meant to.

"Dad, we should probably get you unpacked, right?" I said.

I looked down at my fingernails resting on the back of Emma's chair before raising my eyes to my father's. He held my gaze for a few seconds, for as long as he saw fit I guess.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose we should."

He stood from the table. Keeping his eyes focused straight ahead on nothing in particular, he walked past me and around the corner and up the stairs. I folded my arms across my chest and looked down at Emma, sipping furiously at her straw as if afraid I would come to my senses. "So. What do you want to do on your birthday?" I said.

Emma turned her head, keeping her lips on the straw. "Games!" she said.

"Well, go pick some out," I said.

She ran to the cabinet in the living room, carrying her soda can with her. I turned to Britt, who was watching me from across the table. He redirected his eyes and leaned forward, scratched the back of his neck. He looked up and opened his mouth to say something. Emma called to me from the living room. She couldn't find Hungry Hungry Hippo.

That night we had grilled cheese and tomato soup with Goldfish crackers for dinner. The conversation was stiff and deliberate. My father asked Emma about kindergarten and listened as Emma told him she was more ready than probably all of her classmates to start the first grade. Britt ate the buttered crust I cut from Emma's sandwich. I reminded Emma again to eat slowly, but she drank her soup like cereal milk and tossed her scrunched napkin onto her half-eaten grilled cheese, begging for dessert.

The cake was sitting in the refrigerator behind the milk. I pulled it out and set it on the countertop. The frosting was yellow with purple flowers, Emma's two favorite colors. The cake's plastic covering crackled as I pinched the sides. I lifted the top cover. Some of the icing clung to the ridges.

"Mama," Emma said, bouncing on her knees. "I want cake. Bring the cake." She hit her open palms against the table.

"In a minute, honey." I arranged six candles around the outside edges. I found the lighter in the drawer. "Almost ready."

I lifted the cake with both hands and carried it to the table. I eased into "Happy Birthday," and Britt and my father joined in.

"Now, before you blow out all those candles, make sure you wish your

grandmother a happy birthday, too," Britt said, smiling at my father in an attempt to soften my father's rigid shoulders.

"Her grandmother?" my father said.

I guess he knew then, the lies I told my own daughter. Lies of which my husband reassures her, oblivious himself. Fabrications. I like to think that a more accurate word. No mother wants to tell her daughter that she has no grandmother. That her grandmother ran off like a startled rabbit years ago, and her grandfather is a lonely man.

That was the last thing my father said that night, her grandmother, questioning. The last thing he would say to me for two years to follow.

"Happy Birthday, Miss May Mary!" Emma said.

"Allison told me how they share the same birthday," Britt said. "Isn't that funny?"

Emma pressed her fingers to her collar bone to hold back her hair and leaned forward. With one exaggerated puff, every flame disappeared. Britt clapped and cheered. I sat, looking at my father, but it was his turn to not look back. Emma was gathering the candles, sucking the icing off the bottoms as quickly as she could manage. I watched my father, who watched his hands, which cupped his knees.

Caroline McTeer

Even Though I Pulled The Shade

novel excerpt

Sam Merchant and I couldn't have known that deciding to go back to my house at Aunt Julie's after dinner would determine the course of our summers—the way I'd have to move to Charleston for two months and live with my mom and her husband, and the way Sam would have to grieve alone when his mother ruined his best drawing and did away with his pet snake. All we knew was that if we went to his house, we'd have a short night of it, and a miserable one at that. Like always, we'd sit on one of the many tree stumps in his yard, and Ms. Merchant would first flick her porch light on and off real fast, about twenty times. When that didn't work, she'd yell out the window, "Samuel, tell that girl—" she knew my name was Holly Jennings—"to go home, and you come on in the house. It's late." Finally, she'd stomp outside in her night shirt and dig her calloused feet into the ground, hands on her hips. She'd say, "Sammy, you're breaking my heart, you know it? I ought to be the only woman in your life right now." Given the knowns, I don't think anyone could blame Sam and me for going back to my house.

When we were settled on Aunt Julie's garden swing, I said, "You have the best last name." We synchronized our heel-toe movements so that we were rocking at a nice, even pace.

"Merchant?" he said. "I don't think so. It seems like it'd belong to a man who wears pinstriped suits with a pocket-watch and gold chain tucked in the coat."

"These men have their charm," I said. "Besides, I didn't say it was suited to you. All I said was it's a good li'l surname."

"Okay, then, what surname"—he rolled his eyes—"would be suited to me?"

"Beret," I said, and giggled. At school, when our friends told us we'd turn out to be like the people from movies, who've known each other all their lives and then fall in love mid-thirties or something, I'd shake my head and say Sam and I wouldn't go good together. "I couldn't live with a starving artist," I'd say, and everyone would smile at the thought of an older Sam with a smock and mustache.

"Sam-burr-ay," he said. "I think that's already taken. It's either a tribal dance or a French dessert."

I don't know why I couldn't quit laughing when he said that. Maybe it was because I was tired and strung out on caffeine from the tea I'd drunk. Maybe I was just happy. Either way, I woke Aunt Julie.

We heard a rustle behind the screen of the tiny kitchen window and turned our eyes toward the sound. Aunt Julie stood there at the sink, filling a glass with water. She squinted at us briefly, then turned the cup upside down over the drain. We watched her rinse and fill the glass again, and it made me

sad, the way she wore a long woolen nightgown though it was spring, the slow, dutiful fashion in which she washed dishes and lived, and knowing I'd disturbed her even in this small thing, as if the chore of raising me wasn't enough. Aunt Julie's not the type to flick lights on and off or come outside and yell. She drank her water and then disappeared into the shadows, and we knew she'd gone back to bed.

"Well, Sam," I said, "one thing you can say is that your mom loves you. You have someone who cares enough to wait up at night."

"Oh, come on, Holly," he said. "Lots of people's parents—or guardians—don't keep the home lights burning. It doesn't mean anything, except that they're not obsessive or paranoid. Your Aunt Julie loves you."

"She used to," I said. I paused, and then I said, "It's not about her staying up for me, I swear it's not." I kicked off my sandals and pulled my legs up on the swing with me. I rested my chin on my knees and looked straight ahead when I said, "I like the name Merchant because it reminds me of a story Aunt Julie read to me a lot when I was little. It's about a beautiful girl who grows up rich and comfortable, and even nice. Her father is a merchant. He sells gold and silver, herbs and tea, beautiful dresses made of silk and satin, painted china, salt spoons, lace-trimmed petticoats, gilded mirrors, bureaus made of oak and rosewood, and many precious jewels." Sam nudged me here, because he liked to make fun of me for always quoting books and people word-for-word, especially in situations where accuracy and detail weren't important.

"Okay, okay, I'll wrap it up," I said. "The point is, when she was a young woman—probably my age—she had to make a difficult moral decision. And she chose the right thing, and it meant she had to leave her life of luxury for a life where she had to work hard and not wear pretty clothes anymore. But she'd chosen what she'd wanted to, and she was happy."

"I gotcha," Sam said. He raised his eyebrow, and, mocking me, said quickly, "So your heroine, tried and wise, looks back on the girl she was, and sort of shakes her head and thinks about how vain and foolish it is to live idly, and reflects on the empty, corruptible beauty of the precious jewels she once put so much stock in?"

"No, not at all," I said. "That's what makes the story so great. You get the impression that she could look back on her childhood and be happy about it—thankful for all she had and sure that she was meant to have those blessings at that time in her life. I think that Estella—that was her name—probably always knew that hard days were coming, and I think that at any point in her life, she would have been pure enough to get up and leave her riches for a noble cause."

"Huh, that's different," Sam said. "Not your typical Cinderella story."

"I think that's why Aunt Julie and I liked it so much," I said. "The idea was so foreign to us. See, if anything really good happened to me or to her, it would just mean our lives were following that worn out, rags-to-riches formula." I thought for a minute, then elbowed Sam and smiled up at him.

"Not that either of us would have had a problem with that," I said. "And back then, both of us expected to turn out like Cinderella."

"You don't still?"

"I kind of do."

"But not your Aunt Julie?" Sam said. I bit my lip and shook my head No.

"The fairy-tale seems to have passed her by," I said. "You know, ten or fifteen years ago, it wouldn't have seemed so improbable. She was still young and sort of pretty…and she is, or was, the kind of person who would have thought there was something beautiful and significant about having a baby in the house and taking care of it, even—or especially—if it wasn't her own."

Sam nodded, and I felt guilty. With anyone else, I could have talked stream-of-consciously about a matter I found complicated, and counted on miscommunication to keep the truth safe and secret. Now, I'd unzipped Aunt Julie's heart, as I knew it, and laid it bare for someone she'd never cared to talk to, in a gesture as quick and thoughtless as the one Sam made when he reached over and pulled some hair from my face and tucked it behind my ear.

"I'm tired," I said, and Sam started nodding a bunch of times really quickly, and stood up. He had to be the nicest guy in the world, always eager to respond directly and thoroughly to peoples' hints.

He walked me to the door, and we thanked each other for the evening in a playfully formal way, and then I watched him run down the porch steps and toward his car, leaping once to touch a lower bough on the pecan tree. A knot formed in my chest as it always does in the seconds my mind wraps around all the things I like about Sam: that he's good and smart and funny, that his hair's clipped short and neat and close to his neck, and that he's still so much like he was on our first day of kindergarten, when we shook hands at snack time and promised, through mouthfuls of Goldfish, to become best friends, though these days he's tall and has muscles even in his forearms, wears belts and sometimes smells like cologne.

I really was tired, tired enough that when I made my way through the dark hallway of the house, I was able not only to conjure up old memories, but to live in them.

There was a time, though it is long and completely past, when I was curious as to whom my father was. For the first six years of my life, it didn't occur to me that I had a father, but one day in first grade, a big girl, probably a ten year old, had taken the most naive looking kids she could find—Sam and me—aside at recess, and explained sex to us. After school that day, Sam and I had ridden our bikes—mine still had training wheels—around my neighborhood, and knocked on every single door, asked for the men of the houses, and, when those men came forward, we described my mother to them in detail.

"A tiny, pretty little woman with a cloud of curly red hair, sir," Sam would say. "Did you by any chance make love to a woman like that, somewhere about seven years ago, sir?" I would say, and each man would say no, though their

expressions showed different degrees of pity and amusement and disgust.

I went to Vacation Bible School at Sam's church the summer before we started second grade, and that caused something of a stir. The older women of the church recognized my surname, knew I was the illegitimate child of Nancy Jennings, and had been living with Julie Jennings on Shaw Drive since infancy. Sam and I were both sharp and sensitive enough children to realize we should keep our ears open.

"That sweet little girl," one woman murmured to another one evening at Arts and Crafts, observing me with her peripheral vision. "I don't see how Nancy could stand to leave her."

"I don't see how any mother could leave her child," said the woman in charge of setting our paintings out flat to dry, and making sure we washed our hands before we went to Music. She'd paused, then lowered her voice another notch. "They never knew who the father was, did they?"

The other woman shook her head, and I remember that when she spoke again, her voice was so quiet that Sam squinted his eyes, straining to hear. I managed to catch "Rumors…Dan Deloach…drives the elementary school bus…" and Sam must have heard about the same thing, because he looked over at me, smiled really big, whispered "Mr. Dan!" and shot me a thumbs up. Sam used to have such a bad bowl cut. His hair was too long, and it fell over his ears and in his eyes like an old mop, and he was always brushing it out of his face but didn't realize it was too long until we were in middle school or something.

The other thing about Sam the kid is that he'd observed how normal humans acted and tried to imitate them, but his attempts always turned out something like those of a smart monkey: His smiles looked unnatural and similar to the kind of thing you see on a dog mid-growl, and his thumbs-up were painfully calculated, with the left arm forming a perfect right angle, the tip of the thumb standing straight, the rest of the fist clenched. I remember laughing at him as I dipped a sponge pig in a Styrofoam dish of blue paint and pressed it into my Noah's Ark picture twice, once each between the legs of two giraffes.

I laughed now, and imagined that Aunt Julie's long hallway was the aisle of the old school bus. All through second grade, Sam and I took full advantage of the rides to and from school.

Sam helped me think of new things to say to our driver each morning: Hello, Mr. Dan!; Top of the morning to you, sir!; Howdy mate!; Greetings Earthling!; Here's looking at you kid; Mr. Dan, why the long face?

We always sat in the seat directly behind him if we could help it, and once, Sam used the plastic scissors from his crayon box to snip off a bit of Mr. Dan's hair.

"Some day when I'm big enough, Holly, and I learn how, I'm going to do a TNA test on this," he promised me in a whisper, patting his Ziploc, which he proceeded to shove in his knapsack next to the now de-bagged peanut butter sandwich. "But I'm pretty sure we don't need it. His neck—" Sam arched his

own neck—"The way he moves it, it's like yours."

Surely Sam was an artist from the time he was in the womb.

Mary Murphy

In March

I've never understood Easter, the Holy Ghost, how the flowers
rise through dirt every spring just to die again. Maybe

they would have been better off curled in a bulb, sleeping
until the sun decided to come to them. I don't know

why I'm sick. There are a lot of things leaking
in my body, like spilled juice that dribbles off the edge

of the kitchen table in my home. Sometimes we pretend
we don't see it hit the ground. There is so much to clean up.

One day, I will marry a doctor just so I can keep the smell
of latex gloves he carries from his office. There, everything

just gets thrown away. At night he will listen
through my chest and let me know when something changes.

Is it Spring now? I turn eighteen soon, and I think that's supposed
to mean more than warm rain washing dirt off sidewalks.

My heart, like all of me, is missing a rhythm. I've been told
it's haphazard, and if it gets faster it could just

stop. Like the way the toaster oven shuts off
when the timer finishes, a light burning through its fuse,

the painting in my room that just last week fell
off the wall. Tell me I will find something new.

The Things She Said

My mother doesn't eat very often, maybe one meal a day, so it's hard for her to understand my attachment to food. The closest thing to a weight problem she's ever had is when they made fun of her in elementary school for being too skinny, for being String Bean Jean. I'm 5'10 and a decent 130 pounds, but to my mother, there's not much excuse for any extra. You haven't even had children yet, she says. I think about telling her the world is changing, things are different now. Fat isn't until you can't fit on a roller coaster, and when trying to figure out life, there's no shame in seeking pleasure in Hershey Bars. But my mother doesn't change.

Every Christmas for as long as I can remember, my mother has bought my father an airplane ornament from one of the Hallmark collections. He was a hard man to shop for at Christmas. How do you buy a present for someone with more money than he needs? He kept them on a shelf at his airplane hangar. He said they were too special to put on the tree.

Sometimes I think my parents acted out their love because they didn't know what they felt well enough to really show it. They loved each other in the way I think most people do as they grow older. It became I love you because you are my wife. This doesn't belittle what they felt. This shows that not even love is eternal in the way we'd like to believe, and they took advantage of it while it was there.

My father died six years ago, and my mother tries to hide her purchase of these ornaments around Christmas time. She wraps his present and labels it Daddy, the way she would when she'd buy his presents for us. On Christmas morning, my brothers and I pretend we don't see the package at the back of the Christmas tree. We let her think that we believe she's sleeping when she locks her bedroom door to unwrap the present on her own.

The thing to remember about my mother is that she grew up in Apison, Tennessee. In Apison, Tennessee they fight change. The blacks still say "yessuh" and uncles try to give you 'maters to take home with you. Don't ask what a 'mater is, my mother tells me. They'll think I've raised you all wrong. In Apison, Tennessee, my mother worked in the field and cooked for her family. She made her own prom dress because she knew her mother couldn't afford the extra money. She waited for someone to ask her, but nobody did. At 18, she watched her father sink into a coma after he crashed his airplane. She saw him come back out of the coma, but wasn't there when he died from infections three days later. Her brother shot fireworks at her in December. Her sister grew breasts while my mother kept waiting through 14, through high school, through pregnancy. Her sister told her nobody would ever love her, not even her kids. Today my mother asks us if we love her, and we say yes, but her eyes

shift back to Apison, Tennessee, where things never change. This town will leave her waiting, forever.

"If you could be anything in the world, what would you be?" I ask.

"Happy," my mother says, an answer I use as well.

"This is for school. Please don't embarrass me."

"All right then," she says. "A doctor. Then we'd have money."

I write down doctor and add a few sentences about how my mother has always wanted to help people.

"I'd really just like to go to bed, Mary."

"But this is for school. They said you had to do this."

"I don't have to do anything," she says.

"Fine," I say. It's time to change subjects. "I wrote a poem today about condoms."

I give it to my mother and she reads it slowly. I see her face break out into a laugh. She looks like a horse. Or a badger, a chimpanzee, an elf, a million threads of DNA intertwining until I am embarrassed to see her smile. But I know she is my mother. I know that 23 chromosomes repeat and latch on to my innards. I try to smile less often when I think about that. I don't want my children to be ashamed of me when I grow up.

My mother's heart is actually gold. It is cold but soft, and people (sometimes even family) will do what they can to take it from her. It's all she really has left.

My mother lets strangers enter our home. She feeds them and listens to their problems. She knows what it's like having nowhere to go. She often talks of how she wishes she had someplace to go. She finds no refuge in our home, as I imagine there are cords of ghosts that bind her to our walls. Perhaps they, too, are searching for her heart.

My brother Lex is 24 and lives with her. He's been unemployed for years because no place wants to hire someone with his record. Recently, Taco Bell decided they would risk it, and he works the grill in the back. He's a heroin addict that my mother can't push out of the house. I've seen her almost wet herself, waiting for him to pull the needle out of his arm and free up the bathroom. If this is having children, I never want them.

"Do you think this one would fit?" she asks. "Is it too old for me?" My mother's hands fold around dresses.

I tell her, "Yeah, it would fit, but where would you wear it?"

She nods and moves to the clearance rack. "That's true," she says. "I have no place to go, and I suppose there's no point in buying a dress just to lie in bed. But you should try one on. You should get that black one. I think it would look nice on you. Maybe I'll just get a skirt or something. What do you

think? Think a skirt would work? I bet there's something on sale."

I agree but know that her feelings have been hurt. She doesn't blame me. She never blames me for things like that, even though I think she should start.

My mother loses herself in the store. I don't want to try on the dress because I know she'll buy it if it fits. We can't afford heat in the winter, much less a dress, but some things are too tempting to pass up. I wonder how we fit together still. I wonder how we don't and why my mother thinks she has to buy me things whenever I visit her at home.

"Mama," I call. I can't deny liking the dress.

It's like she thinks she has to buy my love.

My mother is a fighter. She picked up karate when I was three to defend herself against my father when he was drinking. I'm sure she never knew the vast array of situations where this would come in handy.

Lex's girlfriend Stephanie was thin, blond, and obsessed with him, the ideal woman in Lex's eyes. Growing up around my father, Lex had no qualms about taking things out on Stephanie, and it was her job to deal with his frustrations. Stephanie wasn't one of those girls, though. If she thought he had a tone in his voice, she'd let him know, and they were both so stubborn something small would lead to them throwing things at one another.

On this day, Lex had locked her out of our house. Stephanie clawed and pounded at the door, saying she wanted to talk to him, wanted to get her things. Lex just went to the kitchen where she was out of earshot. About half an hour later, he figured she'd given up and left. Then he heard her swinging into our door with a pickax she found in our backyard. He caved and let her get her things, but as she was walking outside, she slapped him.

If Lex was a good man, one that didn't let his pride get in the way, he would've let her leave. But instead, he followed her into the front yard. She began pounding on him, but it was nothing he couldn't handle: his 200 pounds absorbing her 100. But Lex, my father's son through and through, hit her back. She fell and scrambled toward her car.

My mother and I pulled up about that time. We left our car in the road, thinking she was leaving. Instead, Stephanie backed the car up and chased Lex in the grass, trying to run him over.

My mother's face tightened. She got out of her car and ran in front of Stephanie's Ford Explorer. Stephanie hit the brakes and rolled down her window.

"Jean," she said, "get out of my way. This has nothing to do with you."

"That is my son," my mother said. She's good about remaining calm. She is Jean, The Pacifier. Jean, The Responsible. Jean, The One Deserving of a Different Life.

Stephanie got out of the car and spit in my mother's face.

To say Stephanie was ignorant of what she was getting herself into would

be a lie. She's seen my mother's anger more than once. If anything, I would guess Stephanie knew she was in too deep, and she reacted out of fear, knowing it was too late to turn back.

She dug her hand down in her purse, pulled out a can of mace, and began to spray. Things were over in a matter of seconds, but I remember sitting in the car, watching the mace miss my mother's face as she tackled Stephanie to the ground. My mother pushed her face into the dirt, pulled her arms behind her back, and got the mace from her hands.

My mother called to me to get her gun from the glove compartment. It was heavy in my hands, and I was nervous to touch something with that much power. I walked toward my mother and let my forefinger rub the wood-grain of the grip. I pointed the gun down, because my father said that you never point a gun at somebody unless you mean business. And as I handed the gun to my mother, I wasn't scared. I knew the gun wasn't loaded.

"Now," my mother said, "if you're smart, you'll leave."

She kept the gun toward the ground and watched Stephanie as she got in her car and pulled out of our driveway. After the car was out of view, she said for everybody to get in the house.

She was angry at Lex, but we all knew her anger had limits with him. There would be no mention of this later. Whether or not he was thankful for her help, she would believe he was without him saying anything. Over the years she'd come to expect little, but she would never give up on Lex. It was in their relationship I would come to see the sickening side to unconditional love. My other brothers and I knew it was him making her age faster than she should have.

When I was about three, my mother began sleeping in my bed because I was scared to be alone at night. I stayed up and watched the History Channel with my father, so later in the darkness, I imagined murderers (never monsters) hiding in the corners of my room. So she stayed with me.

After a few years, however, it was my mother who needed the company. She became scared to sleep with my father. The night of his death, though, she wanted to move back into his bedroom.

Before he died, he'd lain in their bed for days. There'd been an accident when he was drunk and he lost a lot of blood. In the days leading up to his death, I remember smelling his soul rot away and smelling it the night of his death, when my mother asked me to sleep in his bed with her.

My mother finally slowed her tears enough that she could go to sleep that night, but when she tried to drag me into the bedroom, they came right back. I felt sorry for her, but even at nine I was stubborn enough to refuse to go into his room.

I must've slept on the couch for a year before my mother guilted me back in there, where even though the sheets had been washed, the pillows turned, I could still feel the outline of his body as I went to sleep.

I started to take the same anti-depressants as my mother about two years ago. She likes to bond over how neither of us like taking them, and she sees me as a reflection of her. My mother has romanticized the idea of being immortal through me and my daughter and her daughter. But when I first thought that it might be a good idea to look into medication, my mother wouldn't listen. She said I was melodramatic and sought out problems, something that hurt so much I'll always worry how much truth could be behind it. When the doctor advised I start seeing a psychiatrist, my mother thought he was just trying to take her money. And when the psychiatrist started talking about ideas of manic depression, borderline personality disorder, and mild schizophrenia, my mother broke down in his office.

"She's sad! The world is sad! What do you expect? Take anyone on the street, talk to them like you've talked to her and you can label diseases for them too. There's nothing wrong with my daughter. If you think there's something wrong with crying, then you just haven't experienced a real life."

I knew she had no shame in saying what she was really thinking. The doctor cleared his throat and changed his gaze to me.

"I think you should strongly consider therapy," he said. "I'll give you the number to a great local group."

It was as though he didn't find my mother fit to be in charge of the sanity of another, and maybe he was right.

"When you write about me," my mother said, "tell them about when I took you to Disney World because your dad never got to. Mention how you helped me find the car in Atlanta, how the hotel's carpet had beach towels and we took pictures of us lying on the towels in our bathing suits, because there wasn't time to see the ocean. When you're telling everyone who I am, talk about me skydiving with your dad, but don't mention how I always felt like a burden, how I didn't think he wanted me intruding on his personal life. On second thought, try to leave your dad out of it. I don't want your friends knowing that I was put on a bedtime with my children, or that I was terrified of the man I love. I wish your friends knew to stay away from relationships like that, but I'm too embarrassed. You should talk about the time we got in a motorcycle wreck on the way to karate. Your sparring gear got caught in the back wheel. Do you remember? I never told you this, but that wreck could have been a lot worse. If I hadn't managed to keep it upright for as long as I did, we would've both probably died in that wreck. Oh, and don't forget to tell them about when I volunteered at your elementary school. Talk about how I planted those gardens and dragged you along with me. And that day, that day when we were planting red peppers and you rubbed your eyes after handling the seeds. I almost cried knowing that I'd hurt you. All I could do was run water over your eyes, and you didn't like that either, but it was all I knew to do for you." My mother really does begin to cry here. "Mention how it's your job to

make cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving. Include something about the random things we do together: when we wave at strangers to see how they react, when we dress up to go to grocery stores, when you teach me more about being a teenager than I've ever wanted to know. Maybe you could say something about the blanket I've been making you, the button one I finished yesterday, how you designed it and it's the most creative blanket I've ever seen. Please don't make me sound crazy. You'll make sure they know that I love you, right?"

There's never been a day I haven't loved her, but as I get older I feel like I have such anxiety, not knowing when she'll actually be gone. I am waiting for a day I don't want to ever come. In this way, she and I will never change.

Margaret Sands

Sundown in Todi

Remember how I told you to be careful on those stairs?
Then I turned around, my eyes still sideways
and my shoes parted ways with those slick wizened stones.

That day the rain trapped us in the market tent for hours,
and when the wine guy gave me cup after cup you kept quiet.
Then those meat men sang New York New York
and kicked their khakied legs in the air.
They all guessed that I was older, and that time you didn't mind.

I wanted to say that the whole way down
on the seat of that white skirt you think is too short
I thought of that look you keep for times like that.
Times when the town square sees my underwear
you look at me with those blameful brown eyes.
When you do I see a silhouette of the sister you don't have
and wonder if her skirts would have been longer
her smiles quicker, words slower
mostly I wonder if you ever wonder things like that.

But when I hit that bottom step
you looked at me and complimented my grace,
compared my plunge to the swoop of a pelican
even lied and said the stain wasn't so bad.
I wanted you to remember how that day
the look was on the other side of the ocean
kept by a sleeping door on crooked hinges.

I wanted you to know that when those swallows
painted night onto the sky
I couldn't remember ever having felt safer
than I did in the security of elbows, yours and mine,
skipping through the darkened sidewalks of someone else's city.

You worried about losing your shoe
to some void in the cobblestones
but I worried that only those gypsy paved streets
could guide your primary palette
down the twists in my keyless map.
Because that day in that country of roosters
I looked in your eyes and saw green.

Mrs. Wax

Across the bed my sister talks about vacations and art projects
as if this isn't a place where you leave people to die.
She's wearing that smile that puffs her cheeks slightly more
than a real smile would, it's the one she has in all our Christmas cards.
She smiles although the person she's smiling for, talking for,
can't see, or answer.

Between us, the crumpled skeleton makes a noise.
I saw a play in London.
Daughters of aristocrats paid a man to take their bastard babies
to a foundling hospital in the north.
He wrapped them in silk and fringed shawls,
then buried the newborns in the woods, muffling their cries with soil.
Onstage a shadowed woman, a mother, made that sound, as her baby was buried in a hole
the skeleton makes it now.

My sister is not thinking of that play.
She's thinking of the time when she was three
and I was nothing.
When she waddled across the bushes of our old yard
in her stiff green corduroy pants
and met her first red head in the garden next door.

Now, two decades later, there is no trace of red in this woman's hair.
Since I am not old enough to remember
I trust my sister when she says that the skeleton was a gardener,
that once her spine bent by choice, not like it is now:
the curled limb of a Live Oak, unable to straighten or support itself.

Yesterday my mother told me to be prepared.
I thought she meant for what happens to a body
after a decade of saturation in a sterile building
that smells of wilt and steamed vegetables,
the way a stubborn temper can disintegrate into ground teeth,
or the way scalp peeks through the small shock of ash left on the head.
I was wrong.
What she meant was my sister.
her constant pillow plumping, the tone her voice makes
not really higher in pitch but location
as if her words are floating two feet higher than the rest,
and the undersea world she's drawn on the leg cast

with bright tropical fish and algae that the wearer can't see.
She meant that I need to practice
because letting go is not something
my sister can decorate with bright colors.
Because when I was seven
when we first came to visit this place
a man with a crooked neck sat in the middle of the hallway
drooling and yelling foghorn chants.
She took my hand and made me promise
that she would not end like this.
I was seven, her hair was no where near gray,
her skin was vellum, she could pick me up
and throw me in leaf piles, I promised.

The moans skip and sputter now
crying maybe or trying to remember what crying was like,
when there was a difference between that and breathing.
Hold her hand; she wants to know where you are.
I don't think she has known where I am since she asked my father to do something about the cucumbers growing in the icebox. I told the nurses, thinking they could help, but my father just patted my head and told me it wasn't something that could be fixed.

I take the collection of bones in mine and think of tissues
balled beside trash cans, stored in sleeves, lost in purses,
more contagious than germs.
I try to think of anything but the fragility of the blue blood rivers
between my fingers
anything bigger than the slits of world visible through the blinds.
I can't remember how the play ended.
I can see the women and townspeople digging up the rotting carcasses of their children from the stage. I can see the only survivor, looking through the window at his mother, or maybe I made that up. More vividly I see little girls huddled together, waiting to be sold into slavery, still I hear the soil filled cry, but now
I don't know who's making it.

My sister keeps talking.
Finally she looks at me and raises her eyebrows
just enough to permit me to go.
There's a squeeze on my hand, like a slight shift of air
right before I pull it away,
and no matter how many times I wash them
I can't rid my hands of that phantom warmth only a human can leave.

Dream of Ocean Scars

I stood on the edge
of the boiling black asphalt ocean.
This may have been a dream
(like the time pirates landed in my driveway and I followed them to real water
leaving my father scraping at the sink
searching for the lost leak)
but this time there was nothing missing
in the familiar frustration of my mother's voice.
I could see her but she was far off shore
on the ship that was our blue van.
She called for me to hurry up and swim
when she knew that to walk on such water
would be to kill calluses with solar flares.

A man in a shadowed coat
walked the seawall towards me
stiff in a blood tight tie.
In his background
a cool ocean waned into the horizon
and I forgot to watch the sky
(maybe that's when my teeth fell out,
my father caught them and pressed them back in with super glue,
again, again, again,
my watery gums forced them back, until they were keys on our player piano,
always moving, stuck on a skipping roll).

Only in a dream could a man like that
step from canvas to ferry me,
like a harbor master to a banana barge,
across that parking lot ocean to where
my mother waited. Her nerves shredding
the skin on the soft edges of her thumbs,
picking out a muted onomatopoeia of time
weaving crinkled scars of gray.

Katie Smith

Two Nights After

The air is thick and moist outside making the windows fog. Jane props her feet on the dash, her body low in the seat. Short, blonde hair litters her eyes. We begin our daily tradition: driving down the only decent stretch of road in Anderson. We see thin street people walking by the Bank of America and Little Pigs Barbeque. I scream "Spring break!" out the window. I am a few months late, but the people walking don't notice.

Night sneaks up. We sometimes spot cars with one burnt out headlight, riding slow in right lanes. Jane calls them "one-eyed drivers." We play the game we made up: hitting the roof when we see the burnt headlight. We rush to smack the beige headliner with the tips of our fingers, wanting to be first. It hurts when we thump our knuckles on the glass sunroof. Tonight, I mistake a dim light for a burnt one, but she doesn't notice. I mistakenly spot a skinny motorcycle because the single, bouncing headlight throws me off. Jane doesn't play the game tonight.

We stop in the parking lot of Hamrick's clothing store. Boys from the west side of town call it "The Lot." The drill includes parking the car, blasting the only rap radio station in South Carolina, and sitting on the hood, talking about cars and love and the occasional fight behind CVS Pharmacy. Jane doesn't get out of the car. She sits in the passenger seat, waiting.

I see a friend from elementary school. A knot of tobacco is crooked in the side of his lip. He tells me he is going to Six Flags before school starts. He says he loves the Deja Vu coaster. You go up. Back through a spin. Up again through the spin. There is a moment when we stop talking and look in my car. Jane stares through the sunroof, watching moths play in the shining overhead street lights. He asks questions about Jane's dead father, but I make him stop. I tell him sometimes hearts stop for no reason.

Jane's curfew arrives. We get back on the only stretch of road in Anderson. We probably miss the one-eyed drivers because we are too tired, too sidetracked, too distracted to care. We pull into the driveway and notice her mom and the cat sitting in the living room with all the lights on, waiting. The lights shine gray. I turn off the car, unbuckle my seatbelt, and reach out to hug Jane. Watching her mom and the cat alone together, Jane shakes her head and rubs her wet eyes, telling me she'll never hear her dad tell a joke about Queen Elizabeth and George Bush meeting in a carriage. She'll never see her father making tomato and mayonnaise sandwiches on the Fourth of July.

The next morning we will start over. I will stop by her house to pick her up. I will go inside and eat lunch there. Her mom will ask us to finish all the funeral food, or she'll throw it out. Short men in button-up shirts and old women with curly white hair will visit the house to say how sorry they are. It makes Jane want to leave even more. We'll get in the car and begin riding through the plum-colored night, mistaking dimmed lights for the burnt.

Isaiah Swanson

Radio Hour

Every Friday night, Joe, Ned, and Bud Balhuga sat around their father's feet, and together the four of them listened to *The Bob McNeely Mystery Hour* on the FM dial. The father retrieved the radio from its place at the top of the closet, where it had achieved a status of being unattainable for the children. Without a ladder they could not reach it alone, and their father had no use for a ladder, tall man that he was. Therefore, once a week, amidst much shouting and cheering from the children, the father reached high into the closet and pulled down the old, brown radio.

The father jiggled the dial until it was properly tuned. The next moment there was the musical end of a commercial fading out, then the slow sound of a door creaking and a hysterical, evil laugh. Bud imitated the laugh, making his voice high-pitched and screechy, and twisted his facial features. Joe screamed and hid his face behind his father's leg. Ned climbed into his father's lap, and the father tousled Ned's hair, the usual sign of affection.

"Dear listeners," the radio host said in a slow, menacing voice. "Last week on *The Bob McNeely Mystery Hour*, our beloved Inspector McNeely was apprehended by his vicious twin brother, Tweed "Mega" McNeely. Listen now, as Inspector McNeely has a highly philosophical and thought-provoking conversation with his brother, Mega, as he dangles to his death above a giant Venus fly-trap."

(A crash of cymbals, a choir hums a single high note to create a mood of tension.)

Inspector McNeely: If you are my brother, and I do believe that you are (for you share our mother's eyes!), then you will untie me at once. Untie me, I say, from this treacherous rope!

(A tight swinging sound to signify Inspector McNeely's struggle. The slurp-and-splash of muddied water to create the sensation of hunger and the lopping tongue of the giant Venus fly-trap.)

Mega (laughing maniacally): I will never untie you, nor shall I recall the beast's drooling jowls. For once, I had a great hunger to succeed. And you ruined my chances. You made me a fool in Mommy's eyes! You say I share those eyes with that b— who loved me less? No. And now you follow my tracks to stop me from achieving greatness. There is no higher form of jealousy than this, Inspector, oh brother of mine! And this beast is a symbol of what that jealousy can do to you.

Inspector McNeely: No. No, Brother. It is *your* jealousy of *me* which haunts you so.

Mega: Lies!

(A clap of wood to signal the snapping of the rope. The fly-trap roars—an actual recording of a lion in its natural habitat.)

Mega (laughing again): Be lucky the rope held this time. One more

snap and the rope will break. Then you will be wishing you never began this Fool's Quest. For the beast's hunger consumes him, and for that, it will slowly consume you too. Its acid will melt you down and…

Inspector McNeely: Enough! Cease and desist! I know something you don't know!

(The keyboard plays the music of realization—an increase of several octaves. The cymbals crash again. The choir stops humming. A recording of a dog panting plays in the background: the fly-trap tired of this taunting.)

Mega: And what is that?

Inspector McNeely (in the slow, menacing voice of the host): You will have to wait until next week to find out.

The music faded and the show ended with the evil laugh and the slurping of the giant Venus fly-trap. Bud began chasing Joe around the room, slurping and laughing. Ned sat next to his father on the couch.

"Does Inspector McNeely live?" said Ned.

The father watched Bud chase Joe around the room. He put his arm around Ned. "I don't know, son. We'll see."

The next day was Bring Your Child to Work Day at the place where the father worked. The father brought Ned, since Ned had an undying interest—Joe claiming to be allergic and Bud auditioning that very day for every sport the school offered. It was a plant that produced fish tanks, fish bowls, fish food, and fish apparel. The apparel was not a big seller, but the father's boss, Mr. Bojangle Hopper, insisted upon them, if only for his stubborn pride at having invented such a novelty.

Mr. B. Hopper, as he demanded his employees address him, stood six-feet seven-inches and weighed as much as a steamboat. Yet, it was his fondness for all things nautical and delicate that led him to develop such a factory devoted to what he called "the most graceful creatures on Earth!"

The plant was not large, barely qualified as a plant in fact. It was an old warehouse with machines placed sloppily about, hardly enough room for the workers to stand, and several posters of goldfish, puffer fish, and anemones gracing the walls. Mr. B. Hopper placed them there, hoping to instill a sense of job fulfillment in his employees at seeing the creatures of the deep in such a jolly state in the tanks that came from *his* factory.

The father manned a section of an assembly line. It was the father's job to polish the fish tanks as they moved by on the belt. At this point on the line there were three workers: David Limbo, CJ Watts, and the father. The day was slow. Mr. B. Hopper had not yet arrived.

"Life is a dictionary, Ned. Turn the page and there's always something new." CJ Watts was reading a slip of paper he had almost swallowed from a fortune cookie earlier that morning. He liked Ned Balhuga, and Ned enjoyed coming to his father's work, if only to be closer to him, and to associate with

his coworkers.

"I don't know how that applies to us," said the bitter David Limbo.

CJ Watts picked up a fish bowl and polished it lightly, then placed it back on the line. "You don't know anything, you're only a plebeian. Of plebeian blood you were sprung, and of that you will remain. Ha!"

The outburst had startled poor David Limbo, and he dropped his tank. Ned helped him sweep up the pieces. The father patted David Limbo on the back.

"Don't worry about him," the father said. "Another week and he'll be quoting Shakespeare." David Limbo simply nodded. The father watched Ned carefully dump the broken pieces of glass into a nearby trash can. He thought about Ned's wish to follow in his father's footsteps—become an assembly man, polish things up quickly and efficiently, and place them down again to speed along and out the factory. The father had always loved the speed of his work, the thought that he was a cog in a very efficient process. Something that worked. And his son wanted to be a part of it, too, simply because he wanted to feel the same way as his father.

Yet the father knew it was not a future he wanted for Ned. He wanted Ned to graduate with honors and head to the Ivy League. He had it in him. He had the brains from his mother. The father had been setting aside a little money from his paycheck each week to be able to afford a nice private school for Ned's high school career.

The plant was loud and smoky and violated many safety procedures. The father had to wear earmuffs to block out some of the noise, but he could still hear when the intercom blared out over the plant:

"Balhuga!" It was Mr. B. Hopper. "Get your Scots-Irish fanny up here before I use your head as my caboodle!"

The father smiled at his son apologetically. CJ Watts grabbed Ned by the hand and led him to the snack room. The father made his way to the second floor, the only use of which was to store cardboard shipping boxes. Somewhere amidst the ruckus, his boss had planted a desk, situating the boxes around him, to serve as a sort of makeshift office. Mr. B. Hopper sat at his desk and glared.

"Do you know why you're here, Balhuga?" said Mr. B. Hopper.

"Yes, I do, sir." And he proceeded to recite all of the Seven Clauses of the plant's Mission Statement, which was plastered to the front of his boss's desk.

Mr. B. Hopper had his hand in a fish bowl where swam his pet fish, Monty. He rolled his eyes at the father. "That's not exactly what I mean, Balhuga. And I don't mean it as an existential question either, in case you were thinking of wise-crackin' it up! I mean, do you know why I keep you here? At this plant."

The father shuffled his feet. He thought about his children at school—Bud teasing Joe on the playground. He thought about Ned in the snack room, probably eating a doughnut with jelly. He liked to suck the jelly out first and nibble slowly on the glazed dough.

"I guess I don't know what you mean," said the father.

Mr. B. Hopper leaned back in his chair. "You've brought that kid in here every other week since he was born. I know he's cute—the secretaries love the little blonde ones." He scrunched up his nose and made pseudo-feminine noises that struck the father as slightly sexist. Mr. B. Hopper ceased his cheek-pinching charade and continued. "But that's not the point. It's distracting you. You're not being efficient enough."

The father said, "I didn't think it was a problem. I'll not let it happen again."

Mr. B. Hopper squinted at him, swirling his finger around in the fish tank. "Not good enough, I'm afraid, Balhuga. I don't have time to wait for people to get better."

"Believe me, sir…"

Mr. B. Hopper slammed the desk with impatience, "Oh, I might as well be honest. I don't really like you, Balhuga. You make me squeamish, your knobby little head and greasy mustache. And you never say a damn thing. You always pick up after Limbo out there, and how is he going to work unless he does things for himself? You creep me out, dude! You make my skin crawl, my blood boil. And your passion for the fish tank trade is minimal to say the least. No. I can't have it. I won't have it in my plant. You're sub-par anyway. I don't need a real reason to fire you based on Clause Nine, so I'm going to go ahead and do it. I'm not the liable party here. See me about your check at the end of the week." Then Mr. B. Hopper squealed with delight when Monty began sucking his finger.

The father left the office, his head in a cloud. He stood at the rail and watched Ned with CJ Watts as they threw potato chips at each other in the snack room. He watched Ned throw his head back in laughter, the youthful sound so full of life and potential. The father had no way to help him get to the places his mother had. How could he afford it now?

After work, the father dropped off Ned at the house. Ned hugged him and kissed his forehead and went to the living room to play with Bud and Joe. The father found a babysitter for the night, so that he could think of his situation.

He stopped off at a bar with CJ Watts and David Limbo. David Limbo sat and stared at his coffee while CJ Watts chain-smoked and gazed longingly upon the busty bartender. The father watched himself in the mirror. He had nothing on his plate.

CJ Watts slapped him on the back. "Cheer up, cowboy," he said. "What you need is a little pick-me-up. Hello, there, Lola, baby!" He was calling to the bartender, who turned and winked at him. "Boy, is she something."

"Your type of amusement is not what I need. I don't even need amusement right now. I need a solution," said the father.

"Well, old Limbo here can help with that, can't you?" said CJ Watts to David Limbo. "He can tell the future, you know."

The father raised his eyebrows and glanced at David Limbo, whose forehead nearly rested on the table. A waitress came by with a third round of beer.

"Some new trick, David?" said the father.

David Limbo merely grunted. CJ Watts chuckled. "Picked it up at a card game a few weeks ago. Got us the jackpot. He's a little embarrassed to talk about it still. But I figured this is an emergency." He looked to David Limbo for approval.

The father drank his beer, beginning to feel a little dizzy. David Limbo suddenly straightened. He crossed his eyes, held his hands over the table and began humming.

CJ Watts: See, that is how he summons the gods.

The father: Of what?

(A shatter of glass to signify crashing dishes in the background. David Limbo's humming continues.)

CJ Watts: The gods of The Future, genius. Do you want help or not?

(David Limbo's humming becomes louder. A wind machine whirls and whispers.)

The father: My, what is this smoke?

(CJ Watts tries to shout over the mystical whirling and David Limbo's humming. His speech is muffled.)

The father: What? What's that?

David Limbo: Hold on a second…I think I'm getting something…

(A thump and ice-rattle mean the fourth round of drinks have arrived. CJ Watts whistles at the waitress. David Limbo stops humming and the wind machine stops. A balloon popping alludes to the presence of a supernatural being.)

CJ Watts: What the h—?

The Being: You have summoned me here under pretense of Divine Inebriation.

CJ Watts: He has a point.

David Limbo: I did it. It was me!

The Being: Who lays claim to my services?

The father: That would be me.

(At this point, the slurred speech of the cast betrays their intoxication.)

The Being (voice magnified): I know you. Mr. Balhuga, born in the mountains of the West. Listen to me now, in your state of wavering lucidity. Your son, Ned, the one whom you love above all else, above Joe and Bud, even, may die at the end of this week.

(A pause. The musical notes fall—a sign of the father's crestfallen nature.)

The father: What…

CJ Watts: You're kidding?

(The wind machine starts, and the Being's voice grows softer and quieter, as if exiting through a tunnel.)

The Being: There is nothing to do. Life is a dictionary…wait. Someone else wrote that before me.

The father: Wait. Just a minute…I…

(The wind machine stops to signal the smoke's end. CJ Watts gives a low whistle. A thump of a brick against wood acts as David Limbo passing out.)

The father returned home an hour later by way of taxi. Ned was already in bed. He kneeled next to Ned's bed and watched his boy sleeping. Joe and Bud were screaming at each other in their room. The father ran his fingers through Ned's soft blonde hair and kissed his forehead. His child.

By the end of the week, the father had collected his check from Mr. B. Hopper and left the plant. Mr. B. Hopper also gave him a fish bowl and a hundred catalogues of fish apparel to distribute around the neighborhood.

When the father returned home, he placed the fish bowl on the counter beside the sink in the kitchen. It was medium-sized, big enough for a few small fish. He placed little multi-colored pebbles in the water and let them float to the bottom. He had no fish but liked the movement of the water and how the pebbles seemed to flutter in the bowl.

The children arrived home. Joe ran into his room. He was a fat child, not given to speech unless provoked by Bud. Soon after, Bud walked in wearing an umbrella hat he stole from a dog on the street. He waved to the father and turned on the television.

Then came Ned. He struggled with his big pile of books and the doorknob, so the father helped him carry his things. The father could not stop watching Ned that night at dinner, in the kitchen, even later, in the living room. They had been to the doctor once that week, and nothing had been out of the ordinary. So the father stared, hoping that something would be revealed to him.

When they gathered in the living room, the father once more retrieved the radio from the top of the closet. He set it upon the coffee table and turned the tuning dial. The evil laugh and creaking door surfaced and they settled back to listen.

First came the music—the deep, orchestral drone of strings as Inspector McNeely fought for his life. Mega laughed and laughed, his laughter tearing into the father's skin. Fire began to crackle inside the radio, as the rope kept snapping thinner and thinner. The lion-roar of the fly-trap seemed to shake the radio, to twist the volume to its maximum.

Joe and Bud were holding each other in terror. Ned's hand was wet in the father's own, sturdy palm. He didn't blink as he gazed at the radio.

Mega: What is it? What is it that I do not know?

(A nervous murmuring from Joe and Bud. Some distant object making a loud tick, keeping time.)

Ned: I know what's going to happen.

Inspector McNeely (resigned and tired): You're never going to know. You know everything already that, for you, is worth knowing. This little seed won't save you.

(The lion-roar increases. Joe and Bud yell, as if the yelling might save Inspector McNeely.)

The father: How could you possibly know?

Contributors' Notes

Kelsey Allagood is from Port Orange, Florida, where three hurricanes hit right after she left four years ago. She lived in Colorado for a year before moving to sunny Westminster, South Carolina. Shewill attend Warren Wilson in the fall, and plans to keep writing and potentially study international relations, languages, and literature.

Celeste Brewer only mows the lawn on Sunday mornings when she is sure she has heard another neighbor doing the same thing first. She lives in Greenville.

Cody Buchanan is from the edge of Anderson and Belton, but only claims being from Williamston. She will be attending Wofford College so that her father can continue doing her laundry. She plans on taking all the preparations to become a psychologist, until she decides a Ph.D is too much and acts on her dream of becoming a flight attendant.

Allen Butt loves books and coffee and walking downtown at excessive speeds. In the fall, he will attend Presbyterian College, where he'll study English. He hopes one day to teach literature.

Sarah Carnick is concentrating in Fiction and will be attending Ohio University and majoring in Telecommunications with a concentration in film/video production. She hopes desperately that Athens Ohio is a good place to live if she ends up there.

Matt Casedonte is concentrating in Fiction, none of which made it here due to time constraints and a crippling sense of self-doubt. He will be attending USC in the fall, where his course load will either be soul-crushing or light, depending on whether or not the Hand of God descends from the Heavens and aids him on AP Exams.

Tori Cole enjoys sunergizing and ethnic food. She will be attending College of Charleston this fall, and still doesn't know what she wants to be when she grows up.

Nick Condatore is originally from Florida, though his family is in Seneca. He will be attending the University of Central Florida this fall studying to become a teacher and screenwriter, and enjoys playing guitar in his limited free time.

Andrew Durbin is from Simpsonville and will be attending Bard College in New York this fall. He plans to major in Literature and to hopefully publish a few poems sometime in the future.

Elizabeth Estochen is from Aiken and will be attending the College of Charleston, studying media communications and journalism. She will be going to an in-state school so she can eat once she turns twenty one, and plans on possibly even finding somewhere to live. Hopefully she will adopt a bunny. Only time will tell.

Cassie Falk is from Mullins, South Carolina. She plans to attend College of Charleston Honors College in the fall with a double major in history and English. Later, she plans on being a history instructor on the college level.

Megan Hicks is a creative writing student concentrating in Fiction. She plans to attend St. John's College in Santa Fe, where she will study Liberal Arts.

Hannah Jarrett never writes in the third person. She will be attending Wofford College in the fall. Though she has thought about going into publishing, her future plans are currently undecided.

Jessica Jernigan is from Seneca, South Carolina. After college, where she hopes to major in secondary English education with a minor in Spanish, she hopes to enter the Peace Corps.

Rebekah Latour is from the exciting town of Clemson, where she may one day drown in a large pool of orange. She enjoys riding her horse and quoting episodes of *The Office* with Caroline McTeer. Rebekah plans on attending the University of Virginia, where she will hopefully major in English and philosophy.

Caroline McTeer was an amiable sort of girl, though rather given to unladylike outbursts of laughter and emotion, and possessing an odd affection for soy milk, long novels, alligators, and all things aquatic.

Mary Murphy is an eighteen-year-old pretend-adult from Simpsonville, South Carolina. She loves where she's from but is excited about where she's going. After a summer full of work, music festivals, train rides, and beaches, she will be ready to redefine her life at New York University where she will study dramatic writing. Her hopes include finishing her memoir and leading a happy life.

Margaret Sands is from Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. She plans to attend Loyola University in New Orleans, major in something that requires a minimal amount of math, and work at Coyote Ugly.

Katie Smith enjoys her subscription to Netflix, white Earl Gray tea, and wearing gold jewelry. She is from the town of Anderson, formerly known for their

hot air balloon festival, yet sadly, it moved to Greenville. Katie plans on attending Wofford College where she will study art history and creative writing.

Isaiah Swanson is from Easley and will be attending Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee this fall as an English/Literature major. He will also be working in the Bonner Service Program.

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